

HISTORY OF THE VIKINGS

A CAPTIVATING GUIDE TO THE VIKING AGE AND
FEARED NORSE SEAFARERS SUCH AS RAGNAR LOTHBROK,
IVAR THE BONELESS, EGIL SKALLAGRIMSSON AND MORE



CAPTIVATING HISTORY

RIK RED

A GUIDE TO THE VIKING
FIRST NORSE SETTLEMENT
GREENLAND



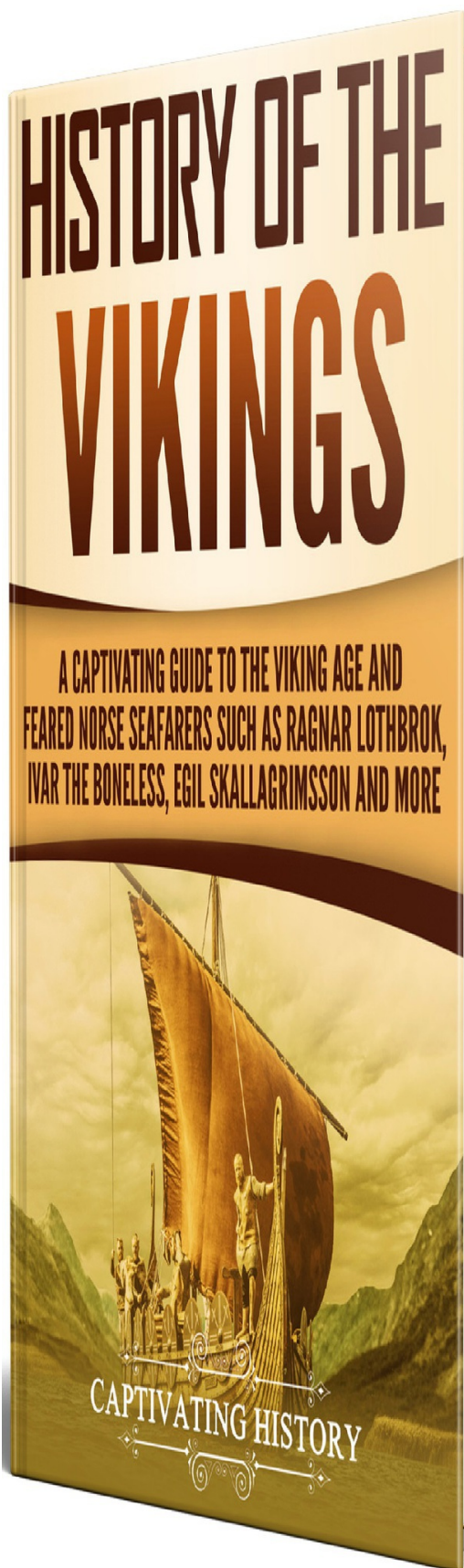
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BEAT COLUMBUS TO AMERICA
NORSE SETTLEMENT AT VINLAND



CAPTIVATING HISTORY



Vikings

***A Captivating Guide to the History of the
Vikings, Erik the Red and Leif Erikson***

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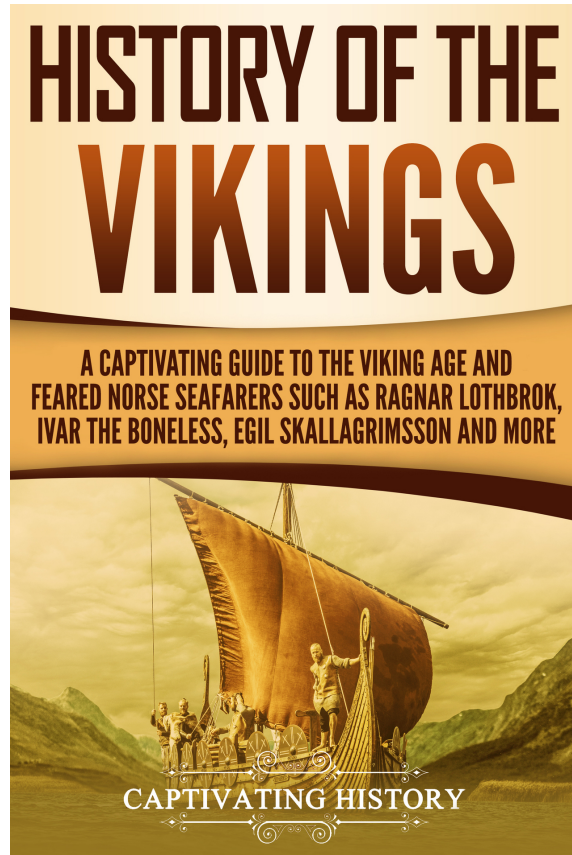
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Part 1: History of the Vikings

A Captivating Guide to the Viking Age and Feared Norse Seafarers Such as Ragnar Lothbrok, Ivar the Boneless, Egil Skallagrimsson, and More



Introduction

The predominant modern image of the mighty Viking warriors has become that of the warmonger and marauding berserker. In popular culture, the Norsemen, portrayed as giant, sword-wielding men with flowing hair and bushy beards, have been reduced to a one-dimensional tribe of ruthless warriors, who cared little for the communities they attacked and plundered. Men like Ragnar Lothbrok, Eric Bloodaxe, Ivar the Boneless and Bjorn Ironside are portrayed as preying on unsuspecting communities and spreading fear across Europe as they laid waste to all that lay before them, taking what they wanted at the point of a sword. It is true that the Vikings were, without a doubt, brutal men living in a brutal age. They did use their skills as warriors to relentlessly attack Europe and the British Isles to increase their wealth and territory, but that is not all the Vikings were, and their contribution to world history is far more than warmongering.

Juxtaposed to the fearless warrior image is a less ruthless version of the Vikings and their place in history. It is the story of ordinary men and women who carved out a living on the harsh and unforgiving shores of the icy North Sea. It is also the story of extraordinary men, like Erik the Red and, his son, Leif Erikson who were great explorers, master seafarers, and brave colonizers. Men who were not just heroic warriors but were also not afraid to sail across the vast ocean in open longboats to search for new lands and unclaimed territories. Men who changed the face of the world they were born into as they discovered new continents, spreading their culture far and wide. It is important to realize that these two images of the Vikings are not mutually exclusive. It's not one or the other, but both.

The Vikings were farmers, traders, and craftsmen who raided and plundered when it suited their needs or when they were not busy working their lands. They were part of a structured and organized society, who believed in fairness and justice, and were governed by the rule of law. They were family men who enjoyed feasting, poetry, and board games, and took part in competitions that tested their strength and military prowess. And yes, they were also brutal warriors. They fought amongst themselves to increase their individual wealth and consolidate their power as they defined the borders of Scandinavia that we recognize today. They ruthlessly attacked and plundered the British Isles again and again. But they also settled there and had a significant influence on British culture, and some even became kings

of England. They were great military strategists, who would just as easily sign a peace treaty as go to war. The Vikings were a complex society that contributed greatly to world history.

The Viking Age, which lasted from circa 790 CE to 1066 CE, was a time of great conquest, expansion, and exploration for the Scandinavian countries. As such, theirs is a history of raiders and plunders, but it is also a history of settlers and explorers. The men, and the myths, that the Viking Age gave rise to offer historians great insight into world history, as well as Norse culture and society, and their stories have kept the legend of the Vikings alive for centuries.

Section One: An Overview of the Viking Age

Chapter One: The Rise of the Mighty Vikings and the Viking Age (Circa 790 CE to 1066 CE)

The period from the earliest recorded raids in the 790s until the [Norman Conquest of England](#) in 1066 is commonly known as the Viking Age of Scandinavian history. For 300 years, beginning at the end of the 8th century, Scandinavians figure prominently in the history of Western Europe, first as pirates and later as conquerors and colonists.¹

Throughout history, the world has seen the rise and fall of many empires. Some, like the Romans and the British, have left an indelible mark on history and are remembered for their great accomplishments, while others have faded into relative obscurity. Regardless of how empires, and their rulers, are judged by history, it is important to remember that all have changed the face of the world around them. And in that regard, the Vikings are similar to many of the great empires the world has seen. However, the Vikings were not empire builders in the true sense of the word. Nor did they build a Viking Empire that fits into the traditional model, but they did colonize and conquer vast lands and leave their mark on history.

One aspect of the Vikings that makes them different from traditional empires is that the Vikings did not originate from one country and had no national identity. They had no central government or single monarch, nor were they a unified group who attacked other countries to expand their national influence and territories. The Vikings were smaller groups of warriors, who in the early years of the Viking Age attacked vulnerable settlements to increase their personal wealth and prestige. They raided and plundered communities in hit-and-run attacks before returning to their homelands. In later years they did rule parts of the British Isles, but they never sought to build a cohesive Norse empire.

It is important to recognize that the Vikings were definitely not a distinct race or tribe. During the Viking Age, the term Viking was applied to all the raiders who came from the northern territories and attacked villages and monasteries in Europe and the British Isles. What differentiated the Norsemen from the communities that they attacked was their foreignness, and more importantly the fact that they were pagans and not Christians.

The Vikings came from the area that is now known as Scandinavia, and included Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway, as well as Iceland and

Greenland. But these were not the modern nations we know today with distinct national identities, but rather an assortment of settlements, communities, and kingdoms. They may not have been a nation, but these northern men, or Norsemen, shared a common socio-cultural distinctiveness from the rest of Europe. They were bound by a shared history and common traits of culture, one of them being the kinship of native languages.²

Since the Vikings were not a single nation but rather a group of kingdoms and settlements on the Scandinavian Peninsula, their history is also not one cohesive story. Viking history is fragmented and at times confusing, and because it is the history of a loosely associated group held together by their cultural similarities, it does not follow a linear progression or storyline. This lack of cohesion is further compounded by the fact that the Vikings had no written history.

Much of what we know of the Vikings is based on the sagas and chronicles written in later centuries. These are very informative works and important historical resources, but it is important to remember that they were also written to serve a political or religious agenda, and this has, at times, led to an obscuring of facts and a proliferation of myths and legends. Battles have been exaggerated, and mere mortals turned into legendary warriors. That is not to say the accounts should be dismissed as pure works of fiction; they are merely embellished versions of historical events that did, for the most part, actually take place.

Many of the stories and legends of the Vikings contain similar information and consistent facts. It is well known that for many centuries, the Norsemen were content in their various homelands. There they raised their families, tended their livestock, and worked the land. But like many societies, there came a time when they were no longer satisfied to remain in the lands of their birth and began to venture farther afield.

Like most things in history, there is not one reason, or single occurrence, that gave rise to the Viking Age, but rather a combination of circumstances and events. There are many reasons why the Norsemen may have left their homes and began raiding and plundering European communities. The most common explanation for the rise of the Viking Age is the pursuit of wealth. During the 8th century, the European nations were becoming wealthier, and the Vikings saw an opportunity to share in Europe's rising fortunes. There is

no doubt that the pursuit of wealth was a driving force behind the Viking Age.

But it was not the only reason. Some of the other theories that have been put forward as causes of the Viking Age are population pressure, primogeniture, the rise of Christianity and its effect on trade, power struggles and the consolidation of kingdoms, and an abundance of vulnerable targets. These are all valid assumptions, but on closer inspection, some make more sense than others.

Most historians today agree that population pressure did not have a large influence on the Viking Age. But it may have played a supporting role, especially when considered in conjunction with primogeniture. Primogeniture meant that the oldest son inherited everything and the younger sons had to make their own fortunes. Without access to farmland, the younger sons had to look elsewhere to support themselves. To them, raiding would have been an appealing option. It was a way to substantially increase their wealth and standing in their communities.

The rise of Christianity could also have influenced the Norsemen and their need to expand their territories. For centuries, the Scandinavians had traded throughout Europe, but as the European nations converted to Christianity, they became less and less inclined to trade with pagans. This decline in trade, and therefore wealth, may have led the Vikings to resolve the situation through raids. The fact that the Vikings were not Christian also meant that they had no qualms about attacking wealthy, religious institutions in Europe. Churches and monasteries were not well protected because Christians did not attack their own religious houses, and the Vikings would have seen them as soft targets.

During the Viking Age, it was not just Europe and the British Isles that were under threat from these ruthless warriors. The Norsemen often waged war against each other, and as some of the stronger rulers began to consolidate their power, weaker chiefs were forced into exile. But it was not only ousted chiefs who rejected the rule of unpopular monarchs. Many regular citizens also left their homelands to avoid living under the control of a ruthless king. For example, during the rule of Harald Fairhair many Norwegians left their homeland and settled in Iceland.

As the Vikings were either forced from their homelands or began exploring the wider world out of curiosity, they were exposed to Europe's growing

wealth, and they recognized an opportunity to increase their own wealth and power. They realized that they were superior warriors and that many of Europe's coastal monasteries were easy targets.

The first recorded raid by the Vikings was an attack on the undefended coastal monastery of Lindisfarne on the British Isles in 793 CE. This is regarded as the start of the Viking Age, a terrifying time for the unprotected communities along the coast of Europe and the British Isles. The Vikings soon became relentless in their attacks, and when they were not farming, they were plundering. This pattern went on for centuries, and shaped the history of Europe and more noticeably the British Isles.

These early raids gave the Vikings their first taste of European wealth, and once they realized how lucrative raiding was, they crossed the treacherous oceans and high seas in all directions to plunder and terrorize settlements up and down the coast of the British Isles, France, Italy, and Russia. Due to their well-designed and shallow-hulled longboats, they were also able to travel up rivers and raid communities farther inland. No one was safe from these fearsome Norsemen, and soon the Vikings reputation preceded them. The mere sight of a longboat sailing upriver was enough to strike terror in the hearts of any European community and many fled before them.

¹ Peter Sawyer, *The Viking Expansion* , [The Cambridge History of Scandinavia, Issue 1](#) (Knut Helle, ed., 2003), p. 105

² The Cambridge History of Scandinavia, Issue 1 (Knut Helle, ed., 2003), p. 4

Chapter Two: A Timeline and Overview of Significant Viking Raids and Battles

The early raids on the coastal monasteries of the British Isles were merely the opening salvos in a series of attacks and battles that lasted for centuries. An overview of the Vikings significant raids and battles provides insight into their history and culture. Not only did the Vikings plunder up and down the coast of Europe amassing great riches, but they also fought amongst themselves as they strove to consolidate power in their own homelands. These battles demonstrate that the Norsemen were not averse to violence and the use of force to achieve their goals.

All the battles that the Vikings were involved in over the centuries are far too numerous to mention. There are, however, some that stand out for their ruthlessness or the impact they had on world history. A brief look at these battles also provides a basic timeline for Viking history.

793 – Viking raid on Lindisfarne

The raid on Lindisfarne in 793 was significant because it marked the beginning of the Viking Age. The attack was unexpected and brutal, but what truly shocked the British and their European neighbors was that these new invaders had no respect for religious institutions.

795 – First Viking raids on the European continent

In 795, the Vikings launched their next raid on the British Isles, and plundered the undefended monasteries on Skye and Iona in the Hebrides, as well as Rathlin off the northeast coast of Ireland. From there they turned their focus towards the continent itself, and the first raid on mainland Europe was an attack on the island monastery of St Philibert's on Noirmoutier. From then on, the Vikings used their shallow-hulled longboats to sail along the coast of Europe and up rivers to launch swift hit-and-run raids on unsuspecting and undefended settlements. These early attacks were quick, efficient, and decisive. The Vikings landed, attacked, took what they wanted, including slaves, and retreated before the communities had time to defend themselves or launch counterattacks.

845 – Ragnar Lothbrok's raid on Paris

In 845, Ragnar Lothbrok sailed up the river Seine and launched a brutal and decisive attack on Paris. He sacked the city and then held it for ransom until King Charles the Bald agreed to pay him 7,000 French livres. This was a

significant Viking attack because it demonstrated that not even the inland European towns and cities were safe from the mighty Vikings. It also showed that the Vikings were not interested in colonization at that time. Once King Charles had paid the ransom, the Vikings left Paris and returned to their homeland.

860 – Bjorn Ironside raids the Mediterranean

According to legend, Ragnar was the founder of a great Viking dynasty, and his sons were just as ruthless as their father and did their own fair share of raiding. His son, Bjorn Ironside, sailed his longboats along the coast of Spain and through the Straits of Gibraltar in 860 to plunder towns on the shores of the Mediterranean.

865 – The Great Heathen Army attacks England

In 865, Bjorn joined his brother, Ivar the Boneless, and attacked England to avenge the death of their father at the hands of King Aella of Northumbria. By then, the British Isles had been raided many times, but this was the first time that a Viking army, known as the Great Heathen Army, came to conquer the British kingdoms. The English were wholly unprepared for the mighty force that landed on their shores, and this attack was the death knell for the Kingdom of Northumbria.

872 – Battle of Hafrsfjord

The Norsemen did not, however, confine their battles to foreign shores. Harald Fairhair spent ten years fighting against his neighboring kingdoms on the Norwegian Peninsula. After much bloodshed, his campaign culminated in the epic Battle of Hafrsfjord in 872. He was finally able to defeat the last of his enemies, and consolidated his power to become the first king of Norway. Harald's victory was significant in Norwegian history, because after the battle, western Norway was united under one king for the first time.

878 – Battle of Edington

In the years that followed the 865 attack on Northumbria, the Vikings spread throughout Anglo-Saxon England. Their advance was finally halted by Alfred the Great, king of Wessex, in 878. During early clashes between the Vikings and King Alfred, it seemed as though Alfred would suffer the same fate as most of his compatriots. His army was decimated on the battlefield, and he was driven out of his own country. But unlike so many others, Alfred the Great refused to admit defeat, and he gathered an army of

local men to face the Vikings at the Battle of Edington. This was a resounding victory for the English, and it secured Alfred a place in history as one of the great English monarchs.

999 – Battle of Svolder

The Battle of Svolder, circa 999, took place between King Olaf Tryggvason of Norway and an alliance between King Sweyn Forkbeard of Denmark and King Olaf Skotkonung of Sweden. The battle was fought at sea, and was an unfair fight between ten Norwegian ships and approximately 70 Danish and Swedish vessels. King Olaf Tryggvason was killed in battle, and Norway then fell under the rule of the Kingdom of Denmark.

1014 – Battle of Clontarf

The Vikings are remembered as great and accomplished warriors, but they were not always successful on the battlefield. They also suffered their fair share of defeats. The Battle of Clontarf (near modern-day Dublin) was one such devastating loss, and it marked a turning point in medieval Irish history. The battle took place on April 23, 1014 between the Irish king, Brian Boru, and a Norse-Irish alliance led by Sigtrygg Silkbeard, king of Dublin. The defeat of the Norse forces effectively ended the Viking domination of Ireland.

1016 - Battle of Assandun

This was a significant clash because it led to the establishment of a short-lived line of Viking kings in England. The battle was fought between the forces of Edmond Ironside, newly crowned king of England and the son of Aethelred the Unready, and the legendary Cnut the Great. Even though the battle ended in a decisive victory for Cnut, the two men decided to divide England between them. However, Edmond died only a few short weeks later, and Cnut became king of England. He and his sons ruled the country for the next 26 years.

1066 – Battle of Fulford

The Battle of Fulford was part of a series of clashes that proved significant in British history and culminated in the famous Battle of Hastings. At Fulford, the English could have faced the Vikings from behind the walls of York, but they chose to come out and fight on the battlefield. This was a devastating military blunder. The English crossed the Ouse River in an attempt to break the Viking “shield wall,” but they were unsuccessful and this led to a decisive Viking victory.

1066 – Battle of Stamford Bridge and Battle of Hastings

The next major battle was the Battle of Stamford Bridge, and this is regarded as the last great battle of the Viking Age on English soil. The battle took place near York in September 1066 and was fought between King Harald Godwinson of England and King Harald Hardrada of Norway. It was a decisive victory for the English, with King Harald Hardrada dying on the battlefield. The battle may have been an English victory, but it still had devastating consequences for the nation of England. The Battle of Hastings, fought between William the Conqueror and King Harald Godwinson, followed soon after the Battle of Stamford Bridge, and it is one of the most significant turning points in British history. Although it was not fought between the English and Vikings, the Norsemen played a role in the outcome. The battle-weary Englishmen, who had been weakened by their clash with King Hardrada, were no match for the French, and this gave William the Conqueror, duke of Normandy, the edge he needed to defeat the English and claim the crown.

Section Two: Heroes and Villains

The Viking Age was a time of great expansion for the Scandinavian nations, and their influence could be felt far and wide. During this time, thousands of Norsemen and women left their homelands to conquer, colonize, raid, and plunder. Some even uprooted their families to start new lives elsewhere. The Swedes predominantly went east to Russia and the surrounding areas, while the Danes explored the North Sea coastline, England, and France. The Norwegians crossed the North Sea to the British Isles and the Norwegian Sea, eventually ending up on the shores of Iceland and Greenland.

As a whole, the names of most of the Viking warriors and adventurers were never recorded, and their identities have long since faded into obscurity. Fortunately, the Viking Age did produce some interesting characters whose names have survived and whose legends have grown with time. Men, mostly jarls and royalty, who left an enduring mark on world history and kept the legend of the Viking warrior alive in popular culture and modern imagination.

The image of the mighty Viking has been built on the backs of legendary men like Ragnar Lothbrok, Ivar the Boneless, Bjorn Ironside, Egil Skallagrimsson, Harald Fairhair, Eric Bloodaxe, Sweyn Forkbeard, Harald Hardrada, Erik the Red, and Leif Eriksson, to name but a few. Depending on what side of their swords you found yourself on, they were either great heroes or terrifying villains. But regardless of how they have been judged by history, they have certainly not been forgotten. By looking at these individuals, their exploits, and the way they are remembered, scholars have been able to build a much clearer picture of Viking history and ideals.

Chapter Three: Ragnar Lothbrok – Man or Myth

Ragnar Lothbrok is one of those historical characters, like King Arthur in Britain, which historians cannot reach a consensus about. They don't seem to be able to agree as to whether he actually existed or not. Is he one man, whose legend has grown and been embellished over centuries until the myth no longer resembles reality? Is he an amalgamation of different historical characters, or is he simply the figment of a cultural imagination? The truth is historians just don't know. There are no surviving records from this time, and most information is based on the sagas and historical chronicles that were written in later centuries, by historians with their own political and religious agendas. But regardless of whether Ragnar really existed or not, he has become the embodiment of the legendary Viking warrior.

Those who believe that Ragnar Lothbrok was one man describe him as a Viking warlord and hero, who lived during the 9th century and was the son of the Danish King Sigurd Ring. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* gives a good account of Ragnar (Lothbrok) Sigurdsson and his exploits that had a significant impact on Britain and France in the 9th century. According to legend, he made his fortune by ruthlessly attacking and plundering English and French villages, and was even rumored to have attacked people while they were praying in their churches. Ragnar Lothbrok was clearly a man without mercy or religious sentiments.

He was the scourge of both England and France as he raided the Anglian kingdoms of Northumbria and Wessex, along with the Kingdom of West Francia, on many occasions. He used the rivers of Europe and the shallow hulls of his longboats to his advantage and sailed far inland. He even attacked Paris in 845. During this raid, his forces were so ruthless that they destroyed an entire division of King Charles the Bald's army. He only withdrew from the city after receiving a ransom payment of 7,000 French livres.

It is important to note that Lothbrok was not his surname but rather his nickname, which meant "hairy or dirty pants." There is no clear explanation as to how he came by this nickname. According to *Ragnar's Saga* (written in the 13th century), it was because of the pants he wore to protect himself when he fought a poison-breathing serpent or dragon. Another, less flattering theory is that when he was dying of dysentery, he soiled his pants.

But if historians cannot even agree on whether or not the man existed, it is doubtful that the true story behind his nickname will ever be revealed.

Ragnar reputedly married three or four times and had a host of children. He is famous not only for his own exploits on the battlefield, but also for being the father of a ruthless and violent dynasty. His sons included Ivar the Boneless, Sigurd Snake-in-the-eye, and Bjorn Ironside, who were all famous warriors and significant historical figures in their own right. They fought alongside their father and on their own, and became the bane of Europe. They raided settlements in Russia, the Baltics, the Mediterranean, and numerous other territories, but France and England were their main targets.

Even the death of Ragnar is disputed. One version is not very heroic and claims that he died of disease, quite possibly dysentery, shortly after he sacked Paris. The other version of his death is far more gruesome and painful. According to legend, Ragnar was returning home after his attack on Paris when his ship was blown off course and ran aground on English soil. He was captured by Aella, the king of Northumbria, and in revenge for Ragnar's numerous attacks on his kingdom, he threw Ragnar into a pit of vipers where he met a grisly end. Although he did not realize it at the time, by killing Ragnar King Aella had made an enemy of perhaps the most dangerous man of the 9th century, Ragnar's son Ivar the Boneless.

Shortly before he died, Ragnar is rumored to have said that his sons would avenge his death. This did, in due course, come to pass, and a horde of Vikings, led by Ragnar's sons and known as the Great Heathen Army, invaded England in 865 and killed King Aella. By killing Ragnar, the Northumbrian king had doomed his own kingdom and changed the course of English history.

Chapter Four: Ivar the Boneless – Ruthless Warrior, Leader of the Great Heathen Army, and Conqueror of England

Ivar the Boneless¹ was the son of Ragnar Lothbrok and his second wife Aslaug. There is no historical record of where his moniker originated; therefore, it is open to interpretation and speculation, and it is not all complimentary. One theory suggests that since Ivar never married or had children, he was impotent, hence the unflattering nickname. Another, and perhaps more likely, version is that he was a cripple who suffered from some kind of genetic defect. It has been suggested by historians that this could have been *osteogenesis imperfecta*, a rare, genetic condition that can result in bone deformities and fractures. Another explanation is [Ehlers-Danlos](#) syndrome, which is a group of [genetic connective tissue disorders](#) that cause recurrent joint dislocations and joint hypermobility. In the *Ragnar's Saga*, Ivar is born with deformed legs because of a curse.

There is another, more flattering theory that says the name refers to his speed and agility in battle. Since there is no historical record that accurately describes Ivar's condition, all these theories are based on speculation and it remains unclear as to how Ivar Ragnarsson became Ivar the Boneless. But interesting as it is to speculate on the origins of his nickname, it is an aside to the story of this mighty Viking's deeds.

What historians do appear to agree on is that Ivar was a fearsome warrior, cunning leader, and brutal warlord. But he was more than just a marauding Viking, picking on soft targets he was also a great leader of men and military strategist.

In 865, a large Viking force, led by Ivar the Boneless and known as the Great Heathen Army, descended upon the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy.² As Ragnar had predicted, his sons had come to avenge his death. But this great Viking army was different from anything that the English had experienced before. For the first time in history, a Viking force had come not to plunder, but arrived with the intent of occupying the British Isles. The English were accustomed to attacks by raiding parties but never before had these parties come to conquer the English kingdoms, and the English were wholly unprepared for the invaders that landed on their shores. Ivar's brief rule in England was one of brutality and vengeance, as the Vikings had no qualms

about inflicting great cruelty on the local population. At the time the Great Heathen Army invaded England, King Aella of Northumbria was involved in a civil war. King Osberht, whose throne he usurped But when the Vikings reached York, King Aella and King Osberht realized that they had to put aside their differences and unite against their common enemy if they wanted to survive. Unfortunately, they were no match for Ivar the Boneless and his warriors. The English tried to stand their ground, but they were slaughtered in battle. King Osberht died on the battlefield, and King Aella was taken prisoner.

Ivar the Boneless and his brothers showed King Aella no mercy, and he was ruthlessly executed as revenge for killing their father. Some historians suggest that Ivar the Boneless tortured and killed King Aella by means of the Blood Eagle.³ The defeat of the English and the death of King Aella marked the end of the Kingdom of Northumbria as an independent entity.

Ivar the Boneless then led his army into the heart of Saxon England, but by now the English had realized that if they didn't present a united front, their kingdoms would be destroyed one by one. Wessex and Mercia joined forces against the Vikings. But Ivar, being a good military strategist, knew when to fight and when to negotiate. When his army was besieged at Nottingham, he negotiated for peace and returned to York. Henry of Huntingdon, writing almost 250 years after Ivar's death, described the situation as such, "Ingwar [Ivar] then, seeing that the whole force of England was there gathered, and that his host was the weaker, and was there shut in, betook himself to smooth words—cunning fox that he was—and won peace and troth from the English. Then he went back to York, and abode there one year with all cruelty."⁴

But peace did not last long. The Vikings returned to East Anglia, and when King Edmund led an army against them, he was captured and brutally executed. He was first beaten with clubs, then tied to a tree and shot with arrows. His body was beheaded, and his head was thrown into a bramble bush. After killing King Edmund of East Anglia, Ivar continued his rampage, moving north and plundering parts of Scotland before settling in Dublin. Shortly after that, Ivar the Boneless disappears from historical records, and it is thought that he died peacefully in Dublin sometime in the 870s. Ivar the Boneless was without a doubt a great military leader and a ruthless Viking warrior. He was responsible for the death of three kings, but he also united three English kingdoms into the Norse state of Danelaw (the

northern, eastern, and central parts of Anglo-Saxon England in which Danish law and customs were observed), thereby changing both the course of British and Norse history. Before the Great Heathen Army attacked England, the Vikings were raiders and plunderers whose greatest accomplishment had been the sacking of Paris, but thanks to the exploits of Ivar the Boneless, they had become conquerors and colonizers who retained a foothold in the British Isles until 1066.

¹ *As with Ragnar Lothbrok, there is some confusion over the true identity of Ivar the Boneless. He may have been one man, but he could also be an amalgamation of various Viking warriors. There are numerous mentions of an Ivar, Ingwar, and Imar in Viking history but it is unclear as to whether these all refer to the same man. The Annals of Ireland and the Annals of Ulster record the death of Imar in 873. Many historians believe that this is Ivar the Boneless. If one accepts that Ragnar Lothbrok was one man, then Ivar was his son.*

² *The Heptarchy is a collective name applied to the seven [petty kingdoms](#) of [Anglo-Saxon England](#) from the [Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain](#) in the [5th century](#) until their unification into the [Kingdom of England](#) in the early [10th century](#). The term "Heptarchy" alludes to the tradition that there were seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, usually enumerated as: [East Anglia](#), [Essex](#), [Kent](#), [Mercia](#), [Northumbria](#), [Sussex](#), and [Wessex](#). The Anglo-Saxon kingdoms eventually unified into the [Kingdom of England](#). (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heptarchy>)*

³ *The Blood Eagle is one of the most graphic, cruel, and [slow torture methods](#) ever described, and it's associated with the Vikings. According to 12th - and 13th -century authors, the Blood Eagle had a long tradition in Scandinavia and was used against their most heinous enemies. The [conventional](#) interpretation of the Viking Blood Eagle is that it was done by carving an eagle onto the back of one's enemy, prying his back open by detaching his ribs from his backbone, and pulling his lungs through the opening. The lungs were then spread over the ribs, giving the impression of wings. This made the body look like a [spread](#) eagle, albeit a mutilated one. (Lassie Smith, Details about the Blood Eagle, One of History's Most Nightmarish Torture Methods, Weird History)*

⁴ http://www.englishmonarchs.co.uk/vikings_10.html

Chapter Five: Bjorn Ironside – Raider of the Mediterranean

Bjorn Ironside was a typical Viking and many of his exploits are recorded in the *Saga of King Heidrek the Wise* and the *Saga of Ragnar's Sons*, as well as other early medieval writings. He was the oldest son of Ragnar Lothbrok and his second wife Aslaug, and the brother of Ivar the Boneless and Sigurd Snake-in-the-eye. When Ragnar Lothbrok died, Scandinavia was split between Bjorn and a number of his brothers. Bjorn became the king of Sweden and was the founder of the House of Munsö, a dynasty that went on to rule Sweden for several generations.

Like his father Ragnar Lothbrok and his brother Ivar the Boneless, Bjorn Ironside was renowned during the Viking Age for his raids on France. He fought alongside his famous father and he successfully raided up and down the coast of France, but he is most famous for his impressive raids in the Mediterranean. Having heard that there were many riches to plunder on the Mediterranean coast, Bjorn Ironside, along with his loyal friend and mentor, Hastein, attacked settlements on the Spanish coast all the way down to Gibraltar before leading his large raiding party into the Mediterranean in 860.

Bjorn Ironside sailed through the Straits of Gibraltar to plunder the south of France and Italy. After capturing Pisa, Bjorn turned his sights on Rome. He had heard stories of the vast wealth that had been amassed by the city that lay at the very heart of Christendom. Unfortunately, Bjorn's sense of direction was not that good, and instead of laying siege to Rome, he mistakenly besieged the town of Luna. Unlike so many other towns, Luna did not immediately fall to his sword, and to avoid a long and drawn-out engagement, Bjorn was forced to resort to trickery to breach the town walls. In one version of the story, Hastein sent word to the bishop of Luna that Bjorn had died but that he had converted to Christianity on his deathbed and wanted to be buried in consecrated ground. In another version, Hastein sent word to the bishop that Bjorn was desperately ill and wanted to convert to Christianity before he died. Regardless of which story is more accurate, the bishop allowed Bjorn to be brought into the city. He was carried into the church by an honor guard before leaping to his feet, sword in hand, and leading his men as they fought their way to the town gate and let in the rest of their army to sack Luna.

After their victory in Luna, Bjorn and his men raided towns in Sicily and North Africa. But, like his father, Bjorn was not a colonizer, and once he had done enough raiding in the Mediterranean, he decided to return to Sweden. But getting out of the Mediterranean was going to prove slightly trickier than Bjorn had anticipated. By the time he reached the Straits of Gibraltar, the rulers of Spain were waiting to attack the Vikings with a fleet of vessels, armed with Greek fire.¹ Bjorn had to fight his way past the Saracens (a term used at the time by Christians to describe Arabs), and during this epic battle, he lost 40 of his ships and much of his loot, but he managed to escape with his life and return to Sweden.

Not long after his return from the Mediterranean, Bjorn accompanied Ivar the Boneless to Northumbria to avenge the death of their father. Once they had gained their revenge and executed King Aella, Bjorn returned to Scandinavia. There he and his remaining brothers divided up their father's kingdom, and Bjorn became the king of Sweden. Raiding had made Bjorn Ironside a wealthy man, and after his return from England, he settled down in his new kingdom and lived out the rest of his days in relative peace. Bjorn fathered two sons, Refil and Erik Bjornsson. After Bjorn's death, his son Erik inherited his throne.

¹ Greek fire was an [*incendiary*](#) weapon used by the [*Eastern Roman \(Byzantine\) Empire*](#) that was first developed c. 672. The Byzantines typically used it in [*naval battles*](#) to great effect, as it could continue burning while floating on water. It provided a technological advantage and was responsible for many key Byzantine military victories. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_fire)

Chapter Six: Harald Fairhair – First King of Norway

Harald Fairhair is credited with being the first true king of Norway, and according to the Icelandic sagas, he ruled circa 872 to 930. Before Harald consolidated Norway under his control, the Scandinavian Peninsula was little more than a collection of minor Viking kingdoms.

Harald was the son of Halfdan the Black, one of the minor rulers on the peninsula and the descendent of a long line of Viking warriors. When Harald was approximately ten years old, his father died when his sleigh crashed through the thawing ice of a frozen lake and he drowned. Halfdan's untimely death meant that Harald inherited the minor kingdom of Vestfold on the Norwegian peninsula. The jarls, wealthy men who owned property and ships, in the kingdom, however, did not want to be ruled by a mere boy and challenged Harald's authority. But they underestimated the young king, and with the aid of his father's chief military advisor, Duke Guthorm, Harald, according to legend, was able to subjugate the troublesome jarls and keep control of his kingdom at the age of ten.

But what of his interesting moniker, and how did he go from being a minor ruler to being the first king of Norway? As the story goes, Harald then fell in love with Gyda, the daughter of King Eirik of Hordaland, but she refused to marry him until he was king of all of Norway. Harald apparently responded by declaring that he would not cut his hair until he had achieved his goal of uniting Norway under his leadership, and had won Gyda's hand in marriage. True to his word, Harald set about uniting Norway, refusing to cut or comb his hair or trim his beard. This earned him the nickname "Harald Tanglehair."

Over the next decade, Harald set about consolidating his power and waged war on all the minor kingdoms around him to bring them under his control. Little is known of the battles he waged during this time, but his military campaign finally culminated in the epic Battle of Hafrsfjord, where Harald faced his two remaining enemies, King Eirik of Hordaland and King Sulke of Rogaland. By then, Norway was basically divided into two factions, those who supported Harald and those who didn't. The Battle of Hafrsfjord was a bloody naval battle fought in Hafrsfjord between Harald's fleet and an enemy armada commanded by Norwegian rulers who wanted to retain

their small kingdoms. The battle lasted almost the entire day and left the fjord littered with the remains of destroyed ships and dead warriors.

In her article written in 2016, “Bronze Swords of Hafrsfjord Tell a Legendary Tale of a Powerful King and a Great Battle,” Kerry Sullivan gives a good description of the battle.

His campaign culminates in the epic Battle of Hafrsfjord. News came in from the southland that the people of Hordaland and Rogaland, Agder and Thelemark, were gathering, and bringing together ships and weapons, and a great body of men. The leaders of this were Eirik king of Hordaland; Sulke king of Rogaland, and his brother Earl Sote: Kjetve the Rich, king of Agder, and his son Thor Haklang; and from Thelemark two brothers, Hroald Hryg and Had the Hard. Now when Harald got certain news of this, he assembled his forces, set his ships on the water, made himself ready with his men, and set out southwards along the coast, gathering many people from every district. King Eirik heard of this when he came south of Stad; and having assembled all the men he could expect, he proceeded southwards to meet the force that he knew was coming to his help from the east. The whole met together north of Jadar, and went into Hafrsfjord, where King Harald was waiting with his forces. A great battle began, which was both hard and long; but at last King Harald gained the day. There King Eirik fell, and King Sulke, with his brother Earl Sote. Thor Haklang, who was a great berserker, had laid his ship against King Harald's, and there was above all measure a desperate attack, until Thor Haklang fell, and his whole ship was cleared of men. Then King Kjetve fled to a little isle outside [Iceland], on which there was a good place of strength. Thereafter all his men fled, some to their ships, some up to the land; and the latter ran southwards over the country of Jadar.¹

At the end of the day, Harald Fairhair emerged victorious. After ten long years of fighting, he had finally achieved his goals: he had united Norway under his rule and married his princess. He also cut his hair, and his nickname changed from Harald Tanglehair to Harald Fairhair.

According to some legends, Harald was a just and fair king, and he ruled Norway for more than 50 years, dying circa 933 at the age of 83, a very old man by Viking standards. But other sources are not so kind about Harald's

legacy and describe him as a ruthless and petty king, who violently consolidated Norway and forced many Norwegians to leave their homeland and settle in newly discovered Iceland. He instituted widespread administrative and land reform and ordered the payment of land taxes. This did not endear him to the predominately farming population, and he was labeled a tyrant. During Harald's reign, many Norwegians fled Norway to seek new opportunities in places like the Hebrides, Orkney, Shetlands, and Iceland.

Be that as it may, what is undisputable is that Harald not only united Norway but founded a dynasty that ruled on and off throughout the Viking Age. Two of his sons, Eric Bloodaxe and Haakon the Good, succeeded him on the throne, and today Harald is remembered as the father of Norway and one of its greatest kings.

¹ <https://www.ancient-origins.net/ancient-places-europe/bronze-swords-hafrsfjord-tell-legendary-tale-powerful-king-and-great-battle-020925>

Chapter Seven: Eric Bloodaxe – Terrifying Family Killer

It was not only the sight of Viking warriors that was enough to scare vulnerable and unprotected settlements, but at the height of the Viking Age, the reputations of these mighty men preceded them and struck terror into the hearts of their victims. One such legendary warrior, who had a fearsome reputation, was Eric Bloodaxe.

Like so many Viking warriors, there is very little contemporary information about Erik Haraldsson, nicknamed Eric Bloodaxe, but his is one of the most famous names in Viking history, especially in the British Isles. Most of what is known about Eric Bloodaxe was written long after his death and is pieced together from information contained in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Irish chronicles, Norwegian stories, and the Icelandic sagas. The Norse sagas depict Eric Bloodaxe as a ruthless, bloodthirsty barbarian whose savagery was legendary, even by Viking standards. His name alone conjures up terrifying images.

Eric Bloodaxe was the son of Harald Fairhair, the first king of Norway. Like most Vikings, Eric grew up in a harsh and violent environment. By the age of twelve, he was taking part in Viking raids and using violence to take what he wanted. But that is not what earned him his horrific nickname. According to legend, Eric killed most of his brothers to clear his path to the throne, and that is why he was called Bloodaxe. While the sagas call him “Bloodaxe,” one of the Latin texts calls him *fratris interfector* (brother-killer), so it seems likely that “blood” in this context refers to family, just as today we refer to “blood relations” as distinct from relations by marriage or adoption.¹

When his father died, Eric succeeded him as king of western Norway, but he only ruled for a few years. Having secured his throne through violence and bloodshed, Eric probably could not have settled down to a life of peace and quiet, even if he wanted to. Few details exist about his brief rule in Norway, but most accounts describe him as a harsh and unpopular monarch. When his younger brother, Haakon the Good, made a claim for the kingdom, with the support of Athelstan of Wessex, Eric Bloodaxe gave up his throne, without a fight, and moved to the British Isles. Having murdered his other brothers to claim the throne, it is unknown why he gave it up to

Haakon. Perhaps he realized he didn't have enough support in Norway to win a battle against the combined forces of Haakon and Athelstan.

Unlike his ruthless older brother, Haakon did not kill his sibling, and Eric was able to flee Norway. He then turned his attention on the British Isles and established himself as ruler of the Viking kingdom of Northumbria.

From his base in York, Eric frequently raided settlements in Scotland and around the Irish Sea. His raids were mainly driven by a need to increase his wealth, as Northumbria was not rich enough to support Eric and his followers, but he was probably also driven by a desire for violence and plunder. Eric ruled Northumbria circa 947 to 948 and then again from 952 to 954, but he was clearly not strong enough to hold his position with any surety. He constantly had to contend with attacks from his rivals in Dublin and the kingdom of Wessex, both of whom were also intent on expanding their own territories to increase their wealth and power.

As the old adage goes, "You live by the sword, you die by the sword," and it was almost inevitable that Eric Bloodaxe would die in battle. He met his untimely end at Stainmore, north of York in a remote area of the Pennines, in 954, reputedly killed by a man named Maccus, possibly the son of King Olaf of Dublin. Eric's death ended independent Viking rule in Northumbria.

¹ Eric Bloodaxe By Gareth Williams

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings/bloodaxe_01.shtml

Chapter Eight: Egil Skallagrimsson – Warrior Poet

Egil Skallagrimsson was a Viking warrior and one of the greatest Scandinavian poets, or skalds. His family immigrated to Iceland to escape the tyrannical rule of King Harald Fairhair, and he was born there circa 910. According to legend (based mostly on his own poetry), he composed his first poem at the very young age of three. His life and adventures are recorded in *Egil's Saga* as part of the *Saga of the Icelanders*, an account of Icelandic history most likely written by another great Icelandic poet, Snorri Sturluson.¹

Storytelling, skaldic poetry, and the reciting of sagas, especially those about the exploits of Viking heroes, was deeply ingrained in Norse society. During Viking feasts, Scandinavian bards, called skalds, recited epic poems or sagas that praised the brave deeds of Viking warriors and their prowess in battle. These sagas were important to the Vikings, because before they converted to Christianity, they had no written records of significant events. Their history was passed on orally through the generations, and the great sagas were memorized and recited by the skalds. These sagas were often incredibly long and detailed, and many, like the *Saga of Erik the Red* and the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, were only written down long after the events that they describe, by which time they had been altered and embellished. Unfortunately, many of the great sagas and skaldic poems have been lost to history. But those that have survived are valuable historical resources for scholars. Not only do they give great insight into the lives of the Vikings and their mighty deeds, but they also provide a glimpse into how the Vikings viewed themselves and how they wanted to be remembered. Egil Skallagrimsson is a prime example of this.

The poetry that Egil Skallagrimsson and his peers specialized in, skaldic poetry as it is now termed, was most importantly praise poetry, designed to commemorate kings and other prominent people, often in the form of long poems. But the poems also often treat exploits of the poet himself, this time in extempore single verses commenting on specific situations and always in a highly self-congratulatory tone. They are extremely complex metrically and use a highly ornate metaphoric language—their complexity presumably helped ensure that it would be remembered even in an age that was for all intents and purposes without writing. But because it is so concerned with

praise, it can tell us a great deal about the qualities the Vikings themselves held dear.²

It is important to note that Egil was not a meek and soft-spoken man, as one might imagine a poet to be, but rather a typical Viking warrior who recognized the importance and value of poetry, and had a talent for composing great poems. In fact, he had such a talent for it that it got him out of trouble a few times and literally saved his head. Egil also had a sizeable ego and often praised his own exploits in his poetry. Much of what we know about Egil was written by Egil himself but he also features prominently in the Icelandic sagas.

According to the Icelandic sagas, Egil Skallagrimsson composed his first poem when he was three to impress the guests at a feast. His father had forbidden him to attend the feast but he went anyway, and after he recited his poem, the guests were so impressed that his father couldn't be angry with him. But Egil could also be violent and the bloodthirsty side of his character was not quite so endearing to everyone. He first killed someone when he was six or seven. This incident apparently took place when he was playing a ball game against a boy called Grim. After a disagreement, where Egil swung a bat at Grim and Grim pushed him to the ground making the other children laugh, Egil fetched an ax and split Grim's skull in two. This led to a larger fight in which seven people were killed. Egil's father was angry with him, but his mother praised his actions and declared that he had the traits of a true Viking and would make a good warrior. This incident illustrates how important respect and the Viking warrior ideals were to Norse society.

After the death of King Harald Fairhair, Egil's family returned to Norway, but it was not long before Egil came into conflict with Harald's son, Eric Bloodaxe. Once again, Egil left Norway and he, along with his brother, Thorolf, spent a number of years raiding and fighting as mercenaries in the British Isles. When Thorolf was killed in Scotland, Egil decided to return to Norway to marry his sister-in-law and claim his brother's inheritance. But his return once again led to conflict with Eric Bloodaxe, and during a dispute, Eric's son, Rognvald, was killed. Egil was banished from Norway and took refuge in Iceland. But this was not the end of his trouble with Eric Bloodaxe.

While on a voyage, Egil's ship was wrecked on the English coast near York and was captured by Eric Bloodaxe. Legend has it that in order to save his head, Egil composed an epic skaldic poem praising Eric and his rule. The king was so impressed that he not only spared Egil's life but also ended his banishment. The poem became known as the "Head-Ransom" poem. Egil's greatest poem, however, had far more tragic roots. After his son Bodvarr drowned, he composed a poem called "Sonatorrek," which is considered to be one of the finest examples of Viking poetry. Egil was both a great poet and Viking warrior, but unlike so many of his contemporaries, he did not meet a warrior's death, instead succumbing to old age and dying at the age of 80.

¹ *Snorri Sturluson is one of the best-known Icelandic skalds. He was born in Iceland in 1179 and became a wealthy and renowned poet and law-speaker, the man in a settlement whose duty was to know the laws of the settlement and those of broader Viking society. Snorri wrote the Prose Edda, which together with the Poetic Edda (written by Saemunder Sigfusson) has given modern historians much insight into Norse mythology. As a poet, Snorri would have heard many legends and tales that at the time only existed in oral form and may have decided to preserve these tales in the Prose Edda. He also composed the Heimskringla, a history of the kings of Norway from the 9th century to 1177. Snorri Sturluson is a good example of the importance of the skald in Scandinavian society. Without skalds, much of the history and culture of the Vikings would have been lost.*

² Christina van Nolcken, Egil Skallagrimsson and the Viking Ideal

Chapter Nine: Sweyn Forkbeard – The Forgotten King of England

Sweyn Forkbeard, so named for his long cleft beard, was born circa 960 and was the son of the Danish King Harald Bluetooth. His life is depicted in several important medieval chronicles outside of Scandinavia, like the 12th -century *Deeds of the Bishops of Hamburg* , written by German scholar Adam of Bremen, or the magnum opus of John of Wallingford, simply titled *Chronica* . The 13th -century English monk, healer, and author tried to capture the history of Sweyn's conquest of Britain, portraying him as a merciless and godless figure, typical of the image of Northern invaders in early medieval England.¹

Circa 986, Sweyn Forkbeard became king of Denmark by seizing the throne from his father and forcing him into exile. But his rule was short-lived. When he led his army in a campaign to capture London, King Eric of Sweden took advantage of Forkbeard's absence and claimed the throne of Denmark. This was a disaster for Forkbeard, because not only did he lose the Danish throne, his campaign in England was also unsuccessful and he was forced into exile in Scotland.

Forkbeard recovered the Danish throne when Eric died circa 994. For a while he was content to merely rule Denmark, but after a few years, Forkbeard once again launched an attack on English shores. Many historians believe that Forkbeard's attack on England was in retaliation for the St. Brice's Day Massacre. This brutal attack took place in 1002 when the English King Ethelred II ordered the massacre of Danes living in England. Historians believe that Ethelred may have ordered the massacre because he feared the Danes could rise up against him. Another theory is that he was tired of being attacked by the Vikings and took his frustration out on the Danish population in England. Apparently, no one was spared, and men, women, and children were all killed. When news of the massacre reached Forkbeard, he swore that he would avenge his countrymen and attacked England in 1003.

This time Forkbeard met little resistance as he spent two years rampaging through the English countryside. He then returned to Denmark in 1005 to deal with a severe famine. This was, however, not the last the English saw of Forkbeard. In the summer of 1013, accompanied by his son Cnut, he

again attacked England with a substantial army. It did not take long for Northumbria and the whole Danelaw to submit to him. This was not due to the strength of his army or his military prowess, but rather because the power of the English throne, under the weak and ineffectual King Ethelred, was collapsing, and the local English lords were not prepared to be slaughtered in his defense. Instead they supported Sweyn Forkbeard in his campaign to capture the throne of England. As Sweyn's power grew, the legitimate king of England became weaker, and when London fell to the Vikings, Ethelred fled to the Isle of Wight and then later to Normandy.

Sweyn Forkbeard was eventually crowned king of England on Christmas Day 1014, but here too his rule was short-lived. He died a mere five weeks later, and King Ethelred returned to reclaim his throne. The exact circumstances of his death are unknown, but sources suggest he fell from his horse.

Sweyn Forkbeard's rule may not have lasted long, but that was not the end of his legacy in England. Sweyn's son, Cnut, had fled England when Ethelred reasserted his right to the throne, but he soon returned and became king of England in 1016, after the death of Ethelred and his son Edmund Ironside. Cnut and his sons, Harold Harefoot and Harthacnut, ruled England for the next 26 years.

¹ <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2018/03/22/sweyn-forkbeard/>

Chapter Ten: King Olaf Tryggvason and the Rise of Christianity in Norway

Little is known about the early life of Olaf Tryggvason. He was born circa 960 and was the son of Tryggvi Olafsson, king of Viken, and became a mighty Viking warrior, who acquired great wealth and fame by raiding and plundering throughout Europe. Being a Norseman, he would have been raised to worship the Viking pagan gods. At the time, however, Christianity was already the dominant religion in Europe and it is believed that King Olaf converted to Christianity during his campaign in Britain around 994. When he returned to his homeland, he brought his new faith with him and became the first Christian king of Norway.

The Vikings may have loved their pagan gods but it was not unusual during this time for Vikings to become Christians, and by the end of the Viking Age, most had converted and were baptized and buried in the faith. One of the factors that made the Vikings adopt Christianity was not religious beliefs but rather practical reasons. Viking traders were beginning to suffer losses because Christian traders and countries began to discriminate against Muslims and pagans. To solve this problem and continue trading in Europe, many Vikings traders merely adopted the signs of Christianity outwardly to protect their business interests. They would wear a cross when trading with Christians but replaced it with Thor's hammer when they returned to their homes. Olaf Tryggvason was, however, a true believer in all things Christian.

In 996, when Olaf returned to Norway from raiding in England, he heard that the current ruler, Jarl Haakon, was becoming increasingly unpopular with the people, and once he arrived, he joined a rebellion against the ruler. After Haakon had been killed, Olaf was proclaimed king by the Althing. As the first Christian king of Norway, he then brutally set about converting the predominantly pagan population to Christianity. Pagan temples were destroyed and churches were built in their place. Those who refused to convert were killed, tortured, maimed, or banished. After bringing Christianity to Norway, King Olaf was determined to spread his new religion's beliefs to the outlying colonies of Iceland and Greenland. But while he may have succeeded in forcefully converting Norway to Christianity, Greenland and Iceland were beyond the reach of his sword, and he had to use other means to convince the settlers to convert.

King Olaf sent missionaries to Iceland in the late 990s, but they met with limited success. He then tried a more aggressive approach and cut off trade between Iceland and Norway, and also threatened to kill Icelanders living in Norway. King Olaf's actions led to growing tensions between pagans and Christians in Iceland. To prevent a civil war, the adoption of Christianity was put to a vote and adopted at the Althing in the year 1000.

Unfortunately for King Olaf, by the time the Icelanders adopted Christianity, the Greenlanders had already left the island. Conversion in Greenland was a more gradual and voluntary process, and it was never mandated by the Althing. One of the reasons for this may have been that Erik the Red, who established the Viking settlement on Greenland, never embraced Christianity and remained a committed pagan until he died.

This might have been a problem for King Olaf, but an opportunity presented itself when Leif Erikson, explorer and son of Erik the Red, visited Norway around 997. Before Leif made his voyage to Norway, he, like the rest of his family and most of the other settlers, worshiped pagan gods.

It was not unusual at the time for young Norsemen to serve as retainers in the royal household, and the Greenlanders were still very much tied to their Norwegian homeland. This visit was an opportunity for Leif to make political connections and form alliances that would place him in good standing in the future. It was also an opportunity for King Olaf to find a convert to spread Christianity to Greenland. When Leif arrived in Norway, he was welcomed into the court of King Olaf, and it appears that the king took quite a shine to the young Greenlander. The time Leif spent with King Olaf was to have a lasting influence, not only on Leif, but also on the settlement of Greenland as it was during his visit to Norway that Leif converted to Christianity.

In Leif, King Olaf had found a young man who was held in high esteem in Greenland and who was able to influence and convert the Greenlanders to the Christian faith. Before Leif and his crew returned to Greenland, they all converted and were baptized. King Olaf then gave Leif the task of spreading the faith to Greenland. According to the *Saga of Erik the Red*, he even sent a priest back to Greenland with Leif.

Using his influence and reputation as a man of fair judgment and honesty, Leif was able to convert many Greenlanders, including his mother, Thjodhild, who had been a life-long pagan. In fact, she became so

passionate about her new religion that she commissioned the first church built in Greenland. In 1932, a group of Danish archaeologists excavating Brattahlid (Erik the Red's homestead) found the remains of what they assume is Thjodhild's church. The church could hold between 20 and 30 worshipers, was surrounded by a wall to keep out farm animals, and was located close to a communal hall, where people could meet and play board games. Later, in 1961, a small horseshoe-shaped chapel was also found on the site as well as the skeletal remains of 144 people.

King Olaf, unfortunately, did not live long enough to see Leif fulfill his mission. He was killed in 1000 at the Battle of Svolder when his small fleet was attacked by the combined superior power of the Swedish, Danish, and Wendish fleets, together with the ships of Jarl Haakon's sons. Apparently, Olaf fought to the bitter end before jumping into the water, never being seen again.

Chapter Eleven: Harald Hardrada – The Last Great Viking Ruler

Harald Sigurdsson, better known as Harald Hardrada (meaning “hard ruler”), was king of Norway from 1046 until his death on the battlefield of Stamford Bridge in 1066. Harald is often referred to as the “Last Great Viking Ruler.” He was a renowned military leader with ambitions to expand his kingdom, and it was this quest for power that ultimately led to his downfall when he attempted to claim the throne of England in 1066.

The youngest of three brothers, Harald was born in Ringerike, Norway in 1015. His father was Sigurd Syr, one of the wealthiest chieftains in the country. Some historians claim that Harald was also a descendent of King Harald Fairhair, but there is no proof to back this up.

In 1030, Harald supported his brother, Olaf, in his bid to claim the Norwegian throne from the Danish King Cnut. Unfortunately, the Norwegians were defeated at the Battle of Stiklestad and Olaf was killed. Harald fled Norway, first going north to Sweden and then east to Kiev and beyond. During the 1030s, Harald raided and fought throughout Europe, traveling as far as Constantinople and Jerusalem. He became a well-known military leader who fought in the service of the Byzantines and became a very wealthy man. In 1042, he returned to Kiev and married Elisabeth, daughter of Yaroslav the Wise, the prince of Kiev.

In 1045, Harald returned to Scandinavia to attempt to reclaim the Norwegian throne. By then, Cnut was no longer interested in Norway and had focused his attention on England. In his absence, Cnut had left Magnus the Good, Olaf’s illegitimate son, to rule Norway. Harald and Magnus, who was his nephew, did not want to go to war with each other, so instead they agreed to share the power. Or rather, Harald bought himself a share of the throne by paying half his sizeable wealth to a bankrupt Magnus. This arrangement did not last long as Magnus died in 1047. He had no heir, and Cnut never returned to claim the throne, so Harald finally became king of Norway. But Harald was clearly an ambitious man, and he wanted to spread his power and influence beyond the borders of his homeland and so declared himself king of Denmark as well. This led to twenty years of conflict and warfare between Norway and Denmark. In 1064, a peace agreement was reached between the two kingdoms.

When he was no longer at war with Denmark, and like so many Vikings before him, Harald Hardrada turned his attention to the British Isles. When Edward the Confessor (King of England 1045 to 1066) died without an heir, Harald believed he had a claim to the English throne, but it passed to Harald Godwinson, the son of one of Edward's advisers. Harald Hardrada, however, was prepared to fight for the right to rule England. He formed an alliance with one of Edward's brothers, Tostig, and together they invaded England in September 1066. Hardrada and Godwinson faced each other on the battlefield at Stamford Bridge. Hardrada's army was vastly outnumbered, and it was Godwinson who emerged victorious when Hardrada was killed by an arrow to the neck. Godwinson's victory was, however, short-lived, and approximately a month later, he was defeated by William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings, with the course of English history changing forever.

Timeline of Heroes and Villains

790s – Beginning of the Viking Age

Early 9th Century – Viking warlord, Ragnar Lothbrok, is born

Circa 845 – Ragnar Lothbrok sacks Paris

Circa 860 – Bjorn Ironside raids and plunders the Mediterranean

Circa 865 – Great Heathen Army, led by Ivar the Boneless, invades England and kills King Aella of Northumbria to avenge the death of his father, Ragnar Lothbrok

Circa 870 – Ivar the Boneless most likely dies in Dublin

Circa 872 to 930 – Harald Fairhair consolidates his power and rules Norway

910 – Warrior poet Egil Skallagrimsson is born

Circa 947 to 948 – Eric Bloodaxe rules Northumbria for first time

Circa 952 to 954 – Eric Bloodaxe rules Northumbria for second time until his death at Stainmore

Circa 960 – Sweyn Forkbeard is born in Denmark, and Olaf Tryggvason is born in Norway

Circa 986 – Sweyn Forkbeard seizes the throne of Denmark from his father but soon loses it to King Eric of Sweden

Circa 990 - Egil Skallagrimsson dies

994 – Sweyn Forkbeard regains the throne of Denmark on the death of King Eric of Sweden

996 – Olaf Tryggvason becomes the first Christian king of Norway

1000 – King Olaf dies at the Battle of Svolder

Circa 1002 – St Brice's Day Massacre

Circa 1003 – Sweyn Forkbeard attacks England

Circa 1005 – Sweyn Forkbeard returns to Denmark

Circa 1013 – Sweyn Forkbeard attacks England again December 1014 – Sweyn Forkbeard becomes king of England; his reign lasts 5 weeks

1015 – Sweyn Forkbeard dies

1015 – Harald Sigurdsson, better known as Harald Hardrada, was born in Ringerike, Norway

1016 – Forkbeard's son, Cnut, becomes king of England. He and his sons, Harold Harefoot and Harthacunt, rule England for the next 26 years

1045– Harald Hardrada becomes king of Norway in conjunction with his nephew Magnus the Good

1047 – Magnus the Good dies without an heir, and Harald Hardrada becomes the sole king of Norway. Claims the throne of Denmark as well, and this leads to twenty years of war and conflict between the two kingdoms.

1064 – Harald Hardrada makes peace with Denmark

September 1066 – Harald Hardrada invades England and attempts to seize the throne from Harold Godwinson. Hardrada is killed on the battlefield at Stamford Bridge.

1066 – End of the Viking Age

Section Three: The Viking Age of Exploration

The Vikings were, without a doubt, ruthless warriors, and their propensity for violence is well documented. It can be argued that they lived in violent and brutal times, but even by the standards of the day, their level of brutality was often considered extreme and they were feared by many. The sight of their dragon boats gliding silently upriver was enough to spread terror throughout a region.

The history and legacy of the Vikings is very much tied to the battles they fought, the territories they conquered, and the mighty warriors they produced, but there is more to their story than centuries of fighting, raiding, and plundering. The Vikings were also great explorers who discovered and settled new lands. They ventured far from their homelands in search of wealth and power, and many of them never returned to the lands of their birth, instead finding new areas to settle and colonize. The Hebrides, British Isles, Faroe Islands, and parts of Russia and Europe were all occupied by the mighty Norsemen at times during the Viking Age. But it was not just the allure of power and wealth that drove the Vikings to seek out new lands; it was also a sense of adventure. They were not just occupiers and colonizers of existing kingdoms; they also settled untamed territories and were the first Europeans to set foot on the North American continent.

Their indomitable spirit and tenacity are clearly demonstrated through their ability to build lives for themselves in lands that most people would consider too uninviting and marginal for settlement. But the Vikings did not let things like climate and rough seas stand in the way of exploration and expansion, and their legacy is not just one of violence and mayhem but also innovation and adaptability. The impact that their exploration and settlement of Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland (a brief Viking settlement along the coast of North America, the exact location of which is still unknown but could have been as far north as Newfoundland or as far south as Cape Cod) had on world history should not be overshadowed by their propensity for violence and plunder.

The marauding tendencies of Vikings certainly had a significant bearing on world history and on the communities they attacked. But no conqueror remains unaffected by the people they conquer or the lands they colonize. Part of the Vikings' success was the fact that they could adapt. The culture of the Viking Age was strong, independent, vibrant, and rich in tradition. It

was good at copying, adapting, developing, and creating, at times intertwining with foreign ideas. The many points of contact with other nations meant that well-informed and well-traveled Scandinavians were familiar with a variety of nationalities, environments, and cultures. Their tolerance of other cultures was presumably an important factor in the Scandinavians astonishing ability to establish themselves as traders, conquerors, or colonists in new countries.¹

The Vikings took the most useful aspects of other cultures and assimilated them into their own society. This ensured that their legacy is so much more than that of a warrior nation. Their culture of innovation and adaptability allowed them to live and thrive throughout the known world at the time and leave a lasting mark on history.

¹ Else Rosendahl and Preben Meulengracht Sorensen, *The Viking Culture* , [The Cambridge History of Scandinavia, Issue 1](#) (Knut Helle, ed., 2003), p. 121

Chapter Twelve: Master Shipbuilders and Navigators

New territories offered the Norsemen more resources and greater political freedom; there they enjoyed fewer laws, taxes, and social constraints. Establishing new settlements also offered the more adventurous Vikings access to a better life. Uninhabited territories, such as Iceland and Greenland, had an abundance of natural resources, farmland, and grazing for livestock. As in most cases of mass migration, it was a combination of factors that drove the Vikings across the ocean, but without advancing technology, and the influence that this had on shipbuilding and navigation, their voyages of conquest and exploration would not have been possible.

Technology played a pivotal role in the Viking Age of expansion. Although no written historical records about the settlement of Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland exist from the time, the sagas that were written some two hundred years later give us insight into how the Vikings were able to traverse the treacherous ocean to reach these remote areas.

The Scandinavians were the most advanced shipbuilders and navigators in Europe at the time, and they were able to cross many nautical miles of open seas in their longboats. The design of the Viking longboats enabled them to reach a height of naval power unheard of before in the region. The typical Norse vessel was wide and stable with a shallow draught that enabled it to travel upriver and land on beaches, but it was also a good seagoing vessel. The boats were light and fast, and there was nothing to rival them at the time.

Longboats were clinker built. This meant that the planks of the hull were not laid edge to edge but rather overlapped each other. The seams between the planks were caulked over with tar-soaked animal hair. This design made the longboats both strong and flexible. The shipbuilders predominately used oak as it was very durable, but other types of timber were also used. These vessels, rigged with large square sails made of rough cloth and fitted with between 6 and 30 rowing benches, were able to cross the treacherous waters of the open ocean where ice floes, icebergs, and frozen rigging were a constant danger. The longboats were an integral part of Viking life, and the Norsemen took pride in their vessels; they gave them names, decorated them with carvings, and adorned them with dragon heads. Viking enemies

often referred to the longboats as “dragon ships” because of their dragon-shaped bow.

The Vikings used their vessels to great effect to raid, plunder, and spread their influence throughout the known world. The long, narrow, light boats with their shallow hulls could not only cross oceans but could also sail upriver to attack inland settlements. During the 9th century, the longboats played a pivotal role in the age of Viking expansion. With these remarkable boats, the Vikings were able to travel upriver and attack inland towns and cities such as Rouen in 841 and Hamburg in 845. The longboats were fast and easy to maneuver and could glide easily through deep or shallow waters, making quick getaways after surprise attacks on vulnerable settlements. The longboats, with their dragon heads and drawings of wild animals on the sails, were also frightening to behold. But the longboats were not just good for hit-and-run raids; they were also used to transport troops to battles and could be tied together to form floating fighting platforms for offshore battles. These boats were also used in various other ways, like trade, the exploration of new territories, fishing, seal and whale hunting, or to transport livestock, goods, and people over vast stretches of open water.

There were a number of different types of longboat designs, and mostly they were classified by the number of rowing positions on board. The Karvi was the smallest Viking longboat and had between 6 and 16 benches. This was a general-purpose vessel that was used for fishing and trade, but could also be used in battle. The Snekkja had at least 20 rowing benches and could carry a crew of approximately 41 men. Snekkjas were useful in raids because they were light and could be beached or easily carried across portages. Skeids were larger warships and had more than 30 rowing benches, carrying around 70 to 80 men. The Norsemen also built boats specifically designed to carry cargo, these were known as Knarr. The Knarr had a hull that was wider, deeper and shorter than a fighting longboat. It could carry more cargo and needed a smaller crew to operate it.

In 1926, Norwegian shipbuilders in Korgen built a replica of the type of longboat that Leif Erikson would have used on his journey to Vinland. The ship, named the Leif Erikson, was 42 feet long modified Knarr, and Captain Gerhard Folgero and his crew sailed it from Bergen, Norway to North America. The ship stopped at the Shetland Islands, Faroe Islands, Iceland, and Greenland before crossing the Atlantic. On July 20, 1926, they docked

at St Johns, Newfoundland. From there they sailed south along the coast to Boston, Massachusetts and finally reached Duluth in Minnesota on June 23, 1927. It was not an easy voyage, and the ship encountered heavy seas and even became ice-locked near Greenland, but this voyage proved that the Vikings were more than capable of sailing from Greenland to North America with their longboats.

Another useful tool in the Viking seafarer's arsenal were their exceptional navigational techniques that allowed them to explore the ocean. They could travel far from land, establish trading posts in new territories, and create settlements in areas that had until then been inaccessible. While Viking navigational techniques are not well understood, it is clear that they were experts at judging speed, currents, and wind direction, as well as predicting the tides.

The Vikings may not have had any of the navigational tools that are available to modern sailors, such as computers and GPS technology, but they had a rich maritime tradition and an outstanding knowledge of the sea. They didn't even have access to a basic compass, but their knowledge of coastlines, currents, navigational markers, whales, and seabirds all played a role in their navigational techniques and enabled them to form mental maps of their journeys. These skills were passed on from one generation to the next, and each generation would have improved their navigational techniques and built on the knowledge acquired from their fathers and grandfathers.

Norsemen used their five senses, practical experience, and to some degree intuition to aid in navigation on the open waters. Along coastlines and in sight of land, they would use navigational markers, such as hills or unusually shaped rock formations, to ascertain their position and the direction in which they wished to sail. They also used nature and the abundance of sea life to aid navigation. For instance, the sailors would observe whales swimming or feeding in certain areas or currents. They knew that at certain times of the year whales would be found in particular parts of the ocean, and so they could use whale pods to orientate themselves. But keeping a close eye on nature was not enough—the Vikings also had to be able to find their way to shore even through dense fog and mist. Here a good ear was needed, and many Norsemen could identify different bird calls and the sounds of waves breaking on the shore

long before they saw the actual coastline. In this way they could guide their longboats safely home and avoid dangerous, rocky shorelines.

They may also have used simple tools such as a plumb bob (a weight on the end of a line) to measure ocean depth and a basic latitude finder that floated in a bucket of water. This comprised of a circle of wood with a perpendicular stick of wood (or gnomon) stuck into it. The sun cast the gnomon's shadow on the circle of wood and helped the Vikings determine latitude. But the Vikings also had to be able to find their way in cloudy weather, and one possible navigational tool that they could have used to do this was a crystal known as a “Sunstone.” These sunstones are mentioned in the *Saga of King Olaf* and were apparently key to navigating in poor weather. Sunstones split a beam of light, separating polarized light from the main beam.¹ By looking at the sky through these crystals, it is possible to see the rings of polarized light that surround the sun even in stormy weather. Being able to identify the sun's location would have given the Vikings a point of reference during long ocean crossings.

But sailing over vast distances in open longboats took more than just remarkable shipbuilding ability, navigational skills, and seamanship, all of which the Norsemen clearly had in abundance—it also took courage. Traversing the deep sea was not for the fainthearted and the men and women who made these voyages were remarkable people. They had the courage to sail across treacherous open waters and brave storms, fog, and ice to settle new lands. Women and children traveled alongside their husbands and fathers to colonize new lands and endured great hardships, pain, and deprivation without complaint. They must have also been very resourceful to carve out a new life for their families in harsh and unforgiving environments.

¹ <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2018/04/viking-seafarers-may-have-navigated-legendary-crystals>

Chapter Thirteen: Erik the Red – Mighty Warrior and Brave Explorer

The Vikings' ability to adapt to their environment and establish settlements in areas that by most standards would be considered harsh and inhospitable, and the impact this had on world history, is clearly illustrated by the adventures of Erik the Red and his son, Leif Erikson.

Erik Thorvaldsson, better known by his nickname Erik the Red because of his flaming red hair and beard, perfectly fits the popular image of the fearsome Viking warrior who spent his days raiding and plundering, and his nights feasting, drinking, and regaling his fellow Norsemen with tall tales of his daring exploits.

Erik has been described in the sagas as a large, strong man, who could wield a double-edged sword or ax with skill and accuracy. He was by all accounts a mighty warrior and also a violent man with a short temper, who did not shy away from confrontation. He was clearly not averse to killing, in battle or in the heat of an argument. In his youth, he did his fair share of looting, joining his fellow Norsemen as they ruthlessly preyed on weaker communities, small settlements, churches, and monasteries. But he was also an adventurer who changed the face of the Viking world. Erik the Red's greatest achievement was not on the battlefield. His legacy is the discovery and settlement of Greenland.

Erik the Red was born circa 950 in Norway as the son of a Norwegian farmer, Thorvald Asvaldsson. When Thorvald was found guilty of murder and banished from Norway, the family moved to Iceland. Erik grew up on a typical Icelandic farm. By the time he was twelve, he was considered a man and was expected to do his fair share of the hard, physical labor that was required to feed the family. He learned how to hunt and fish, as well as raise livestock and plants and harvest crops, and Erik grew up to be a successful farmer.

After the death of his father, Erik married Thjodhild Jorundsdottir, and together they moved to another part of Iceland, named Haukadal. Thjodhild came from a wealthy family, and it is believed that the property where they settled after their marriage may have been part of the marriage dowry or an inheritance from her family. Most Vikings married young; brides could be as young as twelve, and by the age of twenty, most Viking men and women were already married. Marriages were usually arranged by the parents, and

a marriage was seen not only as a union between husband and wife but as a contract between two families. When the parents agreed on a marriage, the groom's family paid a bride price, and when the marriage took place, the bride's father paid a dowry. This meant that both families had a financial interest in the marriage.

Erik made good use of his marriage dowry, and at Haukadal, he prospered. He built a farm called Eiriksstadir and started a family. He had four children who survived to adulthood: three sons, Thorvald, Leif, and Thorstein, and a daughter, Freydis. For a while, the family was doing well and life was good, but unfortunately, things were not destined to stay that way for long.

Erik was known to have a fiery temper and this soon led to conflict with his neighbors that quickly escalated to violence. By the 980s, Erik owned a number of thralls (slaves) who worked on his farm. One day several of his thralls, who were working the land, accidentally triggered a landslide that crushed his neighbor Valthjof's house. One of Valthjof's clansmen, Eyiolf the Foul, killed Erik's thralls. In retaliation, Erik killed Eyiolf the Foul and another man named Holmgang-Hrafn. Erik was then outlawed from Haukadal and the surrounding area, but not from the entirety of Iceland. He was forced to leave his prosperous farm and move his family farther north to the Icelandic island of Oxney.

But this altercation with Eyiolf the Foul and his kinsmen was only the beginning of Erik's troubles in Iceland. Sometime around 982, Erik entrusted his setstokkr (large beams with Viking symbols carved on them that held mystical value for the Vikings as part of their pagan religion) to his friend and fellow settler, Thorgest, for safekeeping. These setstokkr were very precious to Erik as they were a family heirloom. He had inherited the setstokkr from his father, who had bought them all the way from Norway when he was banished to Iceland.

As the story goes, when Erik's new home in Oxney was complete, he returned to claim his setstokkr, but Thorgest refused to give them back. Erik then took the setstokkr by force and set off back to his own farm. But Erik was a savvy man and an experienced warrior, and he feared retaliation from Thorgest. So instead of returning directly to his farm, Erik set up an ambush, and during the ensuing fight, two of Thorgest's sons were killed by Erik. This act could not go unpunished, and once again Erik's fate was decided by the village men. He was found guilty of murder, and this time he was outlawed from the entirety of Iceland. Fortunately for Erik, he was not

banished for life; he was only exiled for three years and his family was able to keep their farm.

For many Vikings this would have been a devastating blow, but Erik was a resourceful man and he turned adversity into opportunity. He spent his years in exile exploring Greenland, and what he found was a land with a similar climate to Iceland and enough resources to support a permanent settlement.¹

In 982, within a few months of being banished, Erik and his crew of Vikings set sail from Sneefellsjokull, planning to locate and explore the landmass that lay to the west of Iceland. One of the reasons that Erik the Red may have chosen to explore Greenland could be related to the hillingar effect. This is a weather phenomenon that at times makes a mirage of Greenland visible from the mountains of northwestern Iceland, even though it is below the geometric horizon.² Since Erik grew up in Hornstrandir, which is in the remote northwestern part of the island, it is quite possible that he had on occasion seen the landmass that lay to the west of Iceland and was curious about it. He may also have hoped it would be a better alternative for him than Iceland, having twice fallen foul of the law there.

Erik and his crew sailed approximately 180 miles across the icy waters of the Atlantic in their open longboats to reach the shores of Greenland. Their first sight of the landmass would most likely have been the towering outline of the east coast. However, due to the large ice banks along the shoreline, they would not have been able to make landfall there. For many people, this would have been a daunting sight, maybe even enough to make them turn back, but Erik and his crew were not deterred by Greenland's icy landscape. When they couldn't make landfall on the eastern side of the island, they rounded Cape Farewell and sailed until they found a place to go ashore on the west coast. Their first priority once they made landfall would have been establishing a place to spend the winter.

According to the *Saga of Erik the Red*, the Norsemen spent the first winter at a place they named Eiriksey (Erik's Island). When the spring came and the ground thawed slightly, they set about exploring the vast landmass. It is estimated that the Vikings covered over 6,000 miles during the four sailing seasons (spring/summer) that they spent exploring Greenland during Erik the Red's exile. They traveled up the fjords and moved farther inland to a place that Erik named Eriksfjord. Here they found arable land and lush

grazing. The second winter they spent in another area, this time in a place named Eiriksholmar. (These names reveal a lot about Erik's character and how he viewed himself.) During their three years in Greenland, the Vikings explored as far north as Snaefell and Hrafnfjörður.

To people nowadays, Greenland may seem like an odd choice as a place to settle. These days there is very little arable land to farm and not much grazing for livestock, not to mention the climate is harsh and inhospitable. But to the Vikings, the new land they explored had a similar climate to what they were accustomed to in Iceland. Like Iceland, the fjords in Greenland froze in the winter and snow covered most of ground, but when spring came and the snow melted, it exposed the lush grazing and arable land that lay beneath the icy layer. Another factor that added to Greenland's appeal for the Norsemen was that it was uninhabited. There were no indigenous people or other settlers living around the fjords or along the coast of the southern part of the island. When the Norse established their settlements, they found the remains of earlier Inuit settlements in the area, but they had long since moved on.

After three years exploring Greenland, Erik briefly returned to Iceland to gather a group of settlers to establish the first European settlement on the icy landmass. After his return, Erik spent the winter recruiting followers and preparing to return to Greenland, not as an explorer with a crew of hardened men, but as a colonizer with a party of three hundred men, women, and children. The settlers who accompanied Erik to Greenland would have had various reasons for leaving Iceland. By then Iceland was heavily populated and some would have been seeking greener pastures and an opportunity to increase their wealth. Others may have been escaping the law. But whatever their reasons, these people were willing to give up their entire lives in Iceland to venture into the unknown and start again. They took with them their household belongings, tools, seeds to grow crops, livestock, and everything they would need to start a new life in a harsh and unsettled territory.

In the summer of 985, Erik the Red and his followers sailed for Greenland and a new life. But making the journey from Iceland to Greenland wouldn't have been easy. Crossing the vast open ocean in Viking longboats was a treacherous and risky venture. The settlers had to deal with rough seas, inclement weather, and large icebergs. Ultimately only fourteen vessels

made it safely to Greenland. The others were blown off course and wrecked or returned to Iceland.

Making it to Greenland was an achievement in its own right, but it was merely the beginning of the adventure for the settlers, and once they landed life did not get any easier. In the early years of the settlement, every day was still a struggle for survival. Homesteads had to be built, crops needed to be planted, and the men had to hunt and fish to feed their families. It took courage, determination, and hard work to survive, and ultimately thrive, in this environment.

Two settlements were quickly established, about 400 miles apart, on the southwestern part of the island. The settlements were known as the Eastern Settlement or [Eystribyggð](#) (present-day [Qaqortoq](#)) and the Western Settlement or Vestribyggð (close to the present-day capital of [Nuuk](#)). These settlements were not along the coast, as one might expect, but farther inland where the land was protected from the icy waters of the Arctic Sea and the cold foggy coastal weather. The Vikings were experienced farmers, and they knew how to identify the best land to settle in. No doubt Erik had scouted these locations during his exile and already earmarked the best land for himself.

Soon after the settlers arrived in Greenland, Erik was elected paramount chief of the Eastern Settlement. He was a strong leader, and he organized his followers to build homesteads and shelters before the onset of winter. Most built typical low, rectangular single-room Viking houses that they would have shared with their livestock, at least for the first winter until they had time to build barns. The only difference between the houses found in Greenland and those in other Scandinavian countries was that instead of using timber, the Greenlanders used stone as their primary building material. This would not have been by choice but rather through necessity. There were no great forests on Greenland, and stone was far more plentiful than timber.

Erik built a home for his family at a place he named Brattahlíð, at the head of Eriksfjord approximately 96 km (60 miles) from the coast. But this was no single-room dwelling. As the paramount chief, Erik would have made sure he displayed his wealth and status. In Greenland his family lived like jarls (nobles), and his home would certainly have had more than one room.

Once Erik settled on Greenland and became chief of the Eastern Settlement, he appeared to have put an end to his violent ways as there is no record of him committing any more crimes or murders. He settled into the life of a successful Viking farmer and trader, becoming wealthy and powerful. He still made numerous voyages to Iceland and even Norway, but he never again went on any more voyages of discovery. Under Erik's leadership, the Greenland settlement grew and flourished, and before long more immigrants braved the icy Atlantic and made the treacherous voyage from Iceland. Records indicate that Erik the Red died around 1002 during an epidemic that a group of new settlers brought to the island. His son, Leif Erikson, became chief of the Eastern settlement after Erik's death.

¹ *It is important to give credit where credit is due and mention that Erik the Red was actually not the first European to discover the landmass he named Greenland. That honor should most likely go to an Icelandic settler named Gunnbjorn Ulfsson. While sailing to Iceland, Ulfsson was blown off course during a storm and saw the shores of Greenland. However, he did not make landfall on the island but instead continued on his voyage. Erik may not have discovered Greenland, but he was most certainly the first European to create a permanent settlement on this remote island.*

² *There are two types of mirages, the inferior mirage and the superior mirage. The names do not refer to the size of the mirage, but rather to the deceptive position of an image relative to an object's actual position. The hillingar effect (also known as an arctic mirage) is a superior mirage and describes an optical illusion or displacement of an observed image in an upward direction, thereby enabling a person to see beyond the horizon. Mirages are caused when light passes through layers of air of differing densities and the air refracts or bends the light. Superior mirages are most common in the Polar Regions and form when the ground or water surface is significantly colder than the air above it, and the temperature inversion refracts the light towards the colder air, making objects visible above their geographic position. Mirages trick the brain into thinking it is seeing something that isn't in fact really there or is different from what the brain is interpreting.*

Chapter Fourteen: Leif Erikson – The First European to Land on the Shores of North America

Leif Erikson is another significant figure in Viking history. Like his father, Erik the Red, he was a great explorer and he is possibly the most famous figure in Norse history. Leif was the first European to set foot in North America, beating Christopher Columbus to the shores of this vast continent by almost half a century. But he not only changed the face of his world by discovering and exploring new territories, he also changed the land he lived in by converting the Greenlanders to Christianity.

Leif Erikson was the second son of Erik the Red, and he was born in Iceland before his father fell out with his neighbors. Leif later moved to Greenland with his family when Erik the Red founded the settlement there. By the time they arrived in Greenland, Leif was old enough to do his share of the work, and he would have toiled alongside the men to build homesteads for the families and shelters for the livestock. He experienced firsthand what it took to settle a harsh and inhospitable land.

This early introduction to settling a territory and the knowledge he gained working alongside his father would undoubtedly have stood Leif in good stead when he later landed on the shores of North America. He would have known how to choose a suitable site for settlement and what tasks needed to be completed to establish a base camp for the winter.

Erik also taught his son about ocean crossings and navigation, and apparently Leif had a natural aptitude for sailing. He developed quite the reputation as a seafarer. One legend tells how Leif, when he was about sixteen years old, spotted a polar bear on an ice floe and decided to hunt the bear. He used his knowledge of the sea and currents to take his boat upstream from the bear and let the current carry him to the ice floe; then he used the same method to get back to land. The people watching from the shore were suitably impressed by this tactic. There is no way of verifying the truth behind this story, but it is a good illustration of Leif's understanding of the sea and its currents, and of his natural talent as a sailor. Sailing and navigation were, after all, an integral part of Viking life, and these were skills that he likely shared with many of his fellow Vikings.

By the age of 24, Leif was ready to captain his first voyage, and around 997 he sailed to Norway, with a crew of fourteen men. At the time, it was not unusual for young men to serve as retainers in the household of a king or chief. This was an opportunity for Leif to forge alliances that would gain him status and political influence. When he arrived in Norway, Leif was welcomed to the court of King Olaf, where he spent the winter.

The time that Leif spent with King Olaf had a profound effect on the young man, and it was this king that converted Leif to Christianity. Until that time, Leif, like the rest of his family and the other settlers in Greenland, worshiped pagan Norse gods. In order to spread Christianity to the distant shores of Greenland, King Olaf needed a convert with influence in the settlements, and in Leif he found just such a person. When Leif left Norway, King Olaf gave him the task of spreading Christianity to Greenland.

Leif clearly took his mission from King Olaf seriously, but he wasn't yet ready to settle down to a life of farming in Greenland. Shortly after he returned from Norway, Leif began preparing for another voyage, one that would ultimately cement his place in history.

For many years, historians believed that the first European to set foot on the North American continent was Christopher Columbus, the Italian explorer, navigator, and colonizer, who landed there in 1492. While the contribution that this great European explorer made to history cannot be underestimated, it is now widely acknowledged that he was not the first European to discover the continent. That honor has been placed squarely on the broad shoulders of Leif Erikson, and today few historians dispute the fact that he beat Columbus to America by almost 500 years.

Leif undertook this mammoth voyage shortly after his return from Norway. It is uncertain how long it took Leif and his crew of 35 men to sail across the Atlantic, but the *Saga of the Greenlanders*¹ claims that they made landfall at three different sites on the North American continent; they named these places, Helluland, Markland, and Vinland. There is still much debate as to exactly where each site was. The first place that they are believed to have landed was an icy and inhospitable region Erikson named Helluland. Helluland means "Land of the Stones" or "Flat-Stone Land," and many historians now believe that this was most likely Baffin Island. From there they sailed on until they came to a heavily forested stretch of coastline

that they called “Markland.” Markland means “Wood Land,” and this could be Labrador. They did not, however, choose to establish any sort of settlement there and sailed farther south along the coast, quite possibly looking for a more suitable place to build a base camp. Approximately two days later, they came to a headland with an island just offshore. This appeared to be a more hospitable area than Helluland and Markland, and Leif decided to build his camp there and named the area Vinland, most likely due to the abundance of wild grapes they found in the region. The exact location of Vinland remains controversial and it could have been as far north as Newfoundland or as far south as Cape Cod.

Leif only undertook one voyage to Vinland, and after he returned to Greenland, he never made any more voyages of discovery. The exact reason for this is unknown, but it could be related to the death of his father, Erik the Red. History is unclear about where exactly Leif was when his father died; some accounts say that he only returned to Greenland after Erik’s death, while others speculate that Erik died shortly after Leif returned from Vinland. Either way, after Erik’s death, Leif took over as chief of the Eastern Settlement and remained at Brattahlid until his death some 20 years later. During his time as chief, Leif used his power and influence to convert many of the Greenlanders to the Christian faith.

After Leif’s death, his son, Thorkel Leifson, became the next chief. After that, the family of Erik the Red fades into obscurity. This is mostly due to the lack of any surviving historical records from the Greenland settlement. If there are any living descendants of Erik the Red and Leif Erikson, they are most likely to be found in modern-day Scandinavia or perhaps even North America.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of accurate historical records and limited archaeological finds, the impact that Leif Erikson had on world history can never be truly quantified. This mighty Norseman had the courage and vision to leave the safe shores of his homeland and discover America almost half a century before Christopher Columbus, and he did it in an open Viking longboat. This took remarkable seafaring ability and navigational skills. He redefined the boundaries of the Viking world and his successful voyage to Vinland encouraged others to follow in his footsteps and visit the North American continent. Contact with the local tribes would have undoubtedly had a lasting effect on both cultures. This extraordinary man

rightly deserves his place in history as a renowned explorer and the first European to set foot on the North American continent.

¹ Grœnlendinga saga - The Saga of the Greenlanders
(<https://notendur.hi.is/haukurth/utgafa/greenlanders.html>)

Chapter Fifteen: The Sagas

Much has been written about Leif and his remarkable voyage across the Atlantic, but unfortunately no historical records exist from his lifetime. Most accounts of the discovery and attempted settlement of Vinland are based on two Icelandic sagas, namely the *Saga of Erik the Red* and the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, written in Iceland approximately 250 years after the events they describe. Leif's story has been embellished, diminished, and altered over time, depending on the motivations of the writer. While both sagas refer to Leif Erikson and his voyage to the North American continent and contain similar elements, they also differ greatly. Here is a brief summary of the two sagas.

*The Saga of the Greenlanders (Groenlendinga Saga)*¹

The *Saga of the Greenlanders* not only describes Leif's voyage to Vinland but also subsequent voyages to the new land. According to the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, Leif's voyage to Vinland was planned and deliberate. The saga describes how Leif knew about the existence of North America because an Icelandic adventurer, Bjarni Herjolfsson had accidentally discovered a new land to the west of Greenland in about 986; in this version of the discovery of Vinland, Bjarni does not go ashore. He sees the landmass from his boat, but when he realizes it cannot possibly be Greenland because there are no glaciers and ice floes, he sails on without making landfall. When Bjarni finally reaches Greenland, he settles on his father's farm and there he remained. He never attempts to mount an expedition to return to the mysterious land that he had seen. He does, however, tell his story to other settlers on Greenland, and this ultimately inspires Leif Erikson, some fifteen years later, to organize an expedition to explore this land. In the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, Leif is the main explorer of Vinland, and he establishes a base camp at Leifsbudir. This serves as a boat repair station, storage area for timber and grapes before they are shipped to Greenland, and a base for subsequent expeditions. Leif retraces Bjarni's route in reverse, past Helluland (land of flat stone) and Markland (land of forests) before sailing across the open sea for another two days until he finds a headland with an island just offshore and a pool accessible to ships at high tide. Leif and his crew make landfall in the area and establish a base. They name the area Vinland, and the winter is described as mild rather than freezing. It is here that they are reputed to

have found an abundance of wild grapes. In the spring, Leif returns to Greenland with a boatload of timber and grapes, never to return to Vinland again. The second expedition to Vinland is led by Leif's older brother, Thorvald, with a crew of about 40 men. This group spends three winters at the base that Leif had established, Leifsbudir. They explore the west coast of the new land in the first summer and the east coast in the second summer. During their exploration of Vinland, they establish contact with the local inhabitants that they called Skraelings. At first, their meetings are peaceful, but slowly animosity and mistrust grow between the two groups and later violence breaks out. After killing some Skraelings, the Norse explorers are attacked by a large force of them, and Thorvald is fatally wounded by an arrow, becoming the first European to die on North American soil. The following spring the remaining Greenlanders decide to return home. Leif's younger brother, Thorstein, leads a third expedition to Vinland to recover Thorvald's body, but he is driven off course and spends the summer wandering aimlessly in the Atlantic before returning to Greenland, having failed in his mission. The following winter Thorstein dies from illness, and his widow, Gudrid, marries Thorfinn Karlsefni, an Icelandic. Thorfinn agrees to lead another expedition to Vinland. This is a larger expedition, and Gudrid accompanies her husband; they even take livestock with them. Their intent appears to be to form a more permanent settlement in Vinland. Gudrid gives birth to a son, Snorri, in Vinland, but shortly after his birth, the group is attacked by the local inhabitants. However, they manage to retreat to a defensive position and are able to survive the attack. The following summer they return to Greenland with a cargo of grapes, timber, and hides. Shortly after this, Leif's sister, Freydis, persuades the captain of an Icelandic ship to mount an expedition to Vinland. They set sail in the autumn and spend the winter at Leif's camp, but disagreements between Freydis and the Icelandic captain leads to the killing of the captain and his Icelandic crew. The Greenlanders then return home with their cargo. This is the last Vinland expedition recorded in the *Saga of the Greenlanders*.

The Saga of Erik the Red (Eirik's Saga)²

In this version of the story, Leif accidentally discovers the North American continent on his return to Greenland following a visit to King Olaf Tryggvason in Norway. On his return voyage he is blown off course during a storm and makes landfall on a mysterious land where he spends the winter. On his return to Greenland, he brings with him not only the

Christian religion but also a cargo of grapes, wheat, and timber. He also rescues survivors from a wrecked ship, which earns him the nickname Leif the Lucky. The *Saga of Erik the Red*, like the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, states that this was the only voyage that Leif made to Vinland. In the spring after Leif returned, his younger brother, Thorstein, leads the next expedition to the new land, but is driven off course by a storm and spends the entire summer wandering aimlessly in the Atlantic. He returns to Greenland without ever making it to Vinland. On his return Thorstein marries Gudrid, but he dies of illness in the winter. The following winter Gudrid marries a visiting Icelander named Thorfinn Karlsefni. He agrees to undertake the largest expedition to Vinland. His wife accompanies him on this voyage, and they also take livestock with them. They are accompanied by another pair of Icelanders, Bjarni Grimolfsson and Thorhall Gamlason, as well as Leif's older brother, Thorvald, his sister, Freydis, and her husband, Thorvard. They sail past Helluland and Markland and continue past some extraordinarily long beaches before landing along the coast and sending out two scouts to explore the land. After three days, the scouts return with grapes and wheat. The expedition sails on until they come to an inlet with an island just offshore and there they make camp. This camp is called Straumfjord. The winter is apparently harsh, and food is scarce. When spring comes, Thorhall Gamlason wants to sail north to find Vinland, but Thorfinn Karlsefni wants to sail southwards. Thorhall takes nine men and sails north, but his vessel is swept out to sea and never seen again. Thorfinn and the rest sail down the east coast with approximately 40 men and establish a camp on the shore of a lagoon. The settlement was known as Hop, and there they found an abundance of wild grapes and wheat. How long they stayed there is unclear, but they did have contact with the local people. The initial encounters are peaceful, and the locals trade with the Norse on various occasions. One day, however, the local people become frightened by the Greenlander's bull and they attack the explorers. The Greenlanders manage to survive the attack by retreating to a more defensive position. After that, the explorers abandon their southern camp and sail north again. Karlsefni and Thorvald Eriksson take a crew and sail in search of Thorhall. They once again have a hostile encounter with the local people, and Thorvald is shot with an arrow and dies from his wound. The explorers remain on the continent for one more winter, but the situation is tense and there are disagreements amongst them. The following summer they

abandon their venture and start the return voyage home to Greenland. This is the last Vinland expedition recorded in the *Saga of Erik the Red* .

A notable difference between the two sagas is that in the *Saga of Erik the Red* , Leif's role has been reduced to that of accidental discoverer of Vinland with Thorfinn Karlsefni as the main explorer of Vinland. Bjarni Herjolfsson's voyage fifteen years earlier is not mentioned at all. In the *Saga of the Greenlanders* , there are five attempted expeditions to Vinland over the course of a number of years, but in the *Saga of Erik the Red* , there is only one huge expedition after Leif discovers Vinland. The name Leifsbudir does not appear in the *Saga of Erik the Red* ; instead two camps are mentioned, Straumfjord (Fjord of Currents) and Hop (Tidal Lagoon). Straumfjord is the main base where the explorers spend the winter, and Hop is the summer camp where timber is cut and grapes are collected and then shipped to Straumfjord before being taken to Greenland. The reason for the differences in the two sagas is unclear. Both were based on oral histories and written long after the actual events, so it could be as simple as two different interpretations with different authors placing different emphasis on different events. Bear in mind that both versions were written by Icelanders that might have had different agendas. The writer of the *Saga of Erik the Red* may have wanted to make the Icelanders' contribution to the discovery of Vinland the significant part of the story; therefore, Thorfinn Karlsefni's role is greatly embellished, and Leif Erikson is only mentioned briefly. The details of the two sagas may differ greatly, but the fundamental premise that Leif Erikson was the first European to land on the North American continent is common to both.

While these two examples deal primarily with the discovery of Vinland and Leif Erikson's role in this remarkable part of history, they also serve as a good illustration of how the history of the Vikings has been altered and interpreted over the centuries.

¹ Grœnlendinga saga - The Saga of the Greenlanders (<https://notendur.hi.is/haukurth/utgafa/greenlanders.html>)

² The Saga of Erik the Red 1880 translation into English by J. Sephton from the original Icelandic 'Eiríks saga rauða' (http://sagadb.org/files/pdf/eiriks_saga_rauda.en.pdf)

Chapter Sixteen: The Significance of the Settlement of Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland

For many Viking enthusiasts drawn to their legacy of warmongering and violence, the settlements of Iceland and Greenland, and the discovery of Vinland, may seem like an aside to the story of these great warriors, but this is actually a very significant part of Viking history and should not be overshadowed by their exploits on the battlefield.

The settlements of Iceland and Greenland clearly illustrate that the Vikings were not just opportunistic attackers who launched blitz hit-and-run raids on unsuspecting communities before disappearing into the mist. They also had the tenacity and ability to cross the open ocean, braving rough seas and foul weather, to establish successful settlements in far-flung territories.

The first Norsemen reached Iceland around 860, and a man called Floki Vilgeroarson was so dismayed by the harshness of the climate that he named the frozen, snow-covered island Iceland. But prospective settlers were not deterred by the name, and the first wave of Norsemen began moving to Iceland during the 870s and established a very successful colony on the island that exists to this day.

The first Viking settlers in Iceland came predominantly from the area around Bergen in Norway. Their main reason for leaving Bergen was most likely to escape the draconian rule of King Harald Fairhair. Other early settlers in Iceland also came from various parts of Scandinavia and even from the British Isles (a number of Celts probably came with the Vikings as spouses and slaves). By the middle of the 10th century, Iceland had thousands of inhabitants. From Iceland, the Vikings migrated to Greenland.

Here once again they were able to establish a successful colony, providing further evidence of their tenacity and ability to build settlements from the ground up. The settlement in Greenland allowed the Vikings to hunt and fish as far north as Disko Bay, above the Arctic Circle, keeping Europe well supplied with furs and skins, and introducing them to exotic items like narwhal tusks, sold as “unicorn horns.” This trade with Europe increased the overall wealth of Norway, but it also enabled Vikings, who may not have had many prospects in their homelands, to become powerful and wealthy. In Greenland, ordinary men, like Erik the Red, were able to own large tracts of land and live like jarls, something that would not have been

possible for them in Scandinavia where land was becoming scarce. The settlement of Iceland and Greenland enabled many Vikings to flee the tyrannical rule of unpopular monarchs and free themselves from a life of oppression.

One of the most significant contributions the settlement of Greenland made to broader world history is that it was a stepping stone to the European discovery of the American continent. Without the colony on Greenland, the Vikings never would have made the voyage to North America; it would just not have been physically possible. Greenland provided the physical starting point and launch pad for Leif's incredible voyage. Once the Vikings had settled in Greenland, it was only a matter of time before they reached the shores of North America. The shortest distance between Greenland and Canada is the Davis Strait, and here the two landmasses are only separated by 250 nautical miles. For seafarers accustomed to making the 1,500 nautical mile crossing between Norway and Greenland, this relatively short distance would not have presented much of a challenge. Viking explorers were already used to living in freezing conditions and dealing with rough waters, frozen seas, ice floes, and the various other challenges of sailing in the open ocean, so they would naturally have attempted the Atlantic crossing. If Leif had lived anywhere else in the world at the time, he probably never would have been the first European to visit North America.

The settlement of Iceland and Greenland, and the attempted settlement of Vinland, has provided scholars and historians with great insight into Viking culture and society. Artifacts found at abandoned Viking settlements in Greenland and Vinland illustrate how far the Vikings were able to travel in their longboats and demonstrate their willingness and ability to settle in harsh and inhospitable lands.

Chapter Seventeen: The Decline of Vinland

The discovery of North America by the Vikings is a significant milestone in world history, but the Norsemen did not stay long on this continent. For modern Americans, it may seem strange that the Greenlanders decided so quickly to abandon any attempts at a permanent settlement in Vinland. On the surface, the continent appeared to offer the Norsemen everything they were looking for. It was certainly a far more hospitable environment than Greenland, the climate was moderate, grazing was plentiful, and the land was fertile. And, of course, there were large forests and plenty of wood for building homesteads and ships. So why didn't the Vikings settle in Vinland? The main reason appears to be that it was just not economically viable. During the Viking Age, Vinland actually had very little to offer the Greenlanders in comparison to Europe. The resources available in Vinland, mostly grapes and timber, were not enough to make the treacherous voyage worthwhile. The distance between Greenland and Vinland was almost 3,500 km (2,100 miles), and the same commodities were available in Norway. Europe was also a source of luxury goods, like spices from the East, salt, textiles, glass, and other commodities that the Greenlanders could not find in Vinland or produce for themselves.

Regular voyages between Greenland, Iceland, and Norway were also essential to ensure the political and cultural survival of the island. The settlers viewed themselves as Norse and followed their Norse traditions. When they moved to Iceland and Greenland, they were not looking to establish new independent homelands or break ties with Norway. Many would have retained their contacts and political connections in their old homeland. If the Vikings had established a settlement in Vinland, it would have been a satellite colony, and that was not just viable; Vinland was just too far away to be an efficient and cost-effective Viking settlement.

The size of the colony on Greenland also made the settlement of Vinland impractical. The small and newly established colony of Greenland could not afford to send 30 or 40 of their most able-bodied men to Vinland for three or four years at a time. They needed those men to help establish and maintain farms and homesteads on the island. When Erik decided to leave Iceland and start a settlement on Greenland, there were various reasons for others to follow him. But at the time of Leif's voyage to Vinland, Greenland

was still a relatively new settlement and there were still plenty of resources for all the settlers.

Another disadvantage of colonizing Vinland was that, unlike Greenland, the North American continent was already inhabited by a large indigenous population. There was some trade between the Vikings and the local tribes, but there were also hostile encounters. The number of settlers was relatively small, and they were always vulnerable to attack.

The discovery of the North American continent was an amazing achievement for the Vikings. It cemented their place in history as great seafarers and explorers, and ensured the Leif Erikson will never be forgotten. Unfortunately, a combination of factors meant that from the time of Leif's voyage to Vinland and the eventual abandonment of any kind of settlement on the North American continent was less than ten years. And it would take another half a century before Europeans again tried to settle on the continent.

Chapter Eighteen: The Decline of the Greenland Colony

The founding of the colony in Greenland was probably Erik the Red's greatest contribution to world history and his most enduring legacy. It certainly earned him his place in the Old Icelandic sagas and in the modern history books, but unfortunately, Erik's colony was not able to survive for as long as his story has endured. For half a century, there were Norsemen living in Greenland, and at the height of the colony's existence, the Viking population numbered between 3,000 and 5,000 inhabitants living on 300 to 400 farms. Greenland was more than a mere outpost; it was a well-established settlement where the majority of Greenlanders spent their entire lives and for the most part, we assume, were happy.

Even though these people always considered themselves Norse and retained strong ties with Norway and Iceland, they were for all intents and purposes Greenlanders. For many, this was the only land they ever knew. It is where they were born, raised, married, had families, and eventually died. Many made successful lives for themselves in this icy and often harsh environment. But unfortunately, the Norse population of Greenland did not survive into the modern age. The land that Erik the Red and his followers struggled so hard to tame could sadly not support their descendants forever.

Survival on Greenland was almost entirely dependent on natural resources, and eventually life became too hard for those living in this harsh environment. Approximately 500 years after Erik had explored Greenland and decided to make it his home, both the Eastern and Western Settlements had been abandoned. Theories and speculations abound as to why life on the island became unsustainable, forcing the Norse to eventually abandon it, but the exact reasons remain unknown. Perhaps one day, through historical research and archeological finds, the answers may reveal themselves, but for now the island has yet to give up all its secrets. What is known is that sometime between the 15th and 17th centuries the entire Norse population of Greenland vanished.

From the start of the colony, Greenland's economy was based on farming, fishing, hunting, and trade. The sea around the island was teeming with life, and during the summer each settlement sent men to hunt in Disko Bay above the Arctic Circle. They returned with meat that could be dried and eaten during the long winter months when fresh food was scarce, along with

other valuable commodities such as seal pelts and walrus tusks that could be traded and sold to Icelandic traders or on trading voyages to Norway. It was primarily this trade between Greenland and Norway that enabled the colony to survive and the settlers to buy much-needed resources, such as timber for homesteads and shipbuilding, which were not readily available on the island.

Most historians agree that it is unlikely that one single catastrophic event destroyed the settlement. It is far more likely that a combination of factors led to the demise of both Viking settlements and eventually forced the Greenlanders to abandon their lifelong homes and move to other more hospitable and sustainable regions.

The Little Ice Age, a period during which Europe and North America experienced unnaturally cold, harsh winters, could have contributed to the decline of the settlement. As a result of these harsh conditions, crops would have failed, and this would have been followed by widespread famine throughout the region. Everyday life would have been extremely hard, and farming on Greenland would have become more and more difficult. As grazing on the island became sparse, there is archeological evidence that they shifted their focus from large cattle to smaller livestock such as sheep and goats. This alone would not have driven the Greenlanders from their homeland. They would still have been able to survive by shifting their focus from farming to fishing, seal hunting, and fur trading,

During the Viking Age, Greenland's biggest exports were walrus tusks, seal pelts, and so-called "unicorn horns." At the time, most Scandinavians wore clothes made of skins, homespun wool, and furs, so there was always a market for the polar bear furs, seal pelts, wool, arctic fox furs, and caribou skins that the Greenlanders had almost unlimited access to. They also exported luxuries, such as walrus tusks and unicorn horns, to the royal courts of Europe. Obviously, there were no actual unicorns in Greenland, but the Vikings appeared to have been clever marketers and knew how to sell their products. The so-called "unicorn horn" was actually the tusk of the narwhal, a whale found only in the icy waters of the northernmost oceans. Narwhals are relatively small, and the males have a left canine that twists in a spiral and can grow up to ten feet long. For a time, these tusks were highly prized by the Europeans. They crushed the horns for medicinal purposes, and in the French court, the king's food was served in unicorn horns. However, as fashion and tastes on the European continent changed,

there would have been less demand for the natural resources that the Greenlanders relied on so heavily as part of their trade with Europe. As furs, skins, and unicorn horns declined in popularity, so did the economy of the island.

Unfortunately for the Greenlanders, not only were the products they produced no longer in great demand, trade routes were also changing. The decline of the settlement coincided with Christopher Columbus' voyage to the Americas, and it was highly likely that the world was just changing. With new territories to explore and trade opportunities opening up in the west, Europeans probably no longer had a use for Greenland. The cold, icy landmass to the north no longer held any fascination for Europeans as they now turned their attention to the Americas and everything that the vast, unexplored continent had to offer.

Growing isolation would also have contributed to the decline and eventual demise of the Norse settlement. Ship traffic between Iceland and Norway was becoming more sporadic. While shipbuilding may have improved in the half a century since Erik the Red founded Greenland; the sea remained treacherous, especially so far north. Icebergs and giant waves were a constant danger in the frigid waters, and with the dwindling demand for resources and products from Greenland, fewer traders were willing to make the long and arduous voyage. In the same way that it had not been worth the Greenlanders' efforts to travel regularly to Vinland for resources, it was no longer economically viable for traders to make the voyage to Greenland. As a result, not only was it more difficult for the Greenlanders to sell their produce, supplies to the colony also became more sporadic and expensive.

Increasing isolation also meant that the Greenlanders were losing touch with their national identity and Norse heritage. Without regular trade and travel to Norway, the Greenlanders were becoming more and more isolated from their homeland and culture, and this would have impacted the mental health of the colony. They may have suffered from depression and lacked the motivation to keep the colony moving forward. The world around them was changing, and Greenland was being left behind. The colony no longer offered many opportunities for younger generations. There was no more arable land available for younger sons, and due to the change in climate, the land that was available was becoming more marginal for farming, meaning there was less grazing for livestock.

The abandonment of Greenland appears to have taken place in an orderly manner. This also suggests that the colony declined slowly rather than being abandoned suddenly as a result of one cataclysmic event. Excavations on the island have turned up very few valuables, and archeologists believe this indicates that the settlers left in an orderly fashion and took everything of value with them. Besides not knowing why the Greenlanders left, there are also no records of where they went. For the most part, they were most likely assimilated back into Norwegian society. Having kept close ties with Norway for most of the time that the colony existed and because there were no indigenous people on Greenland to influence the Norse culture, the Greenlanders would have retained their Norse identity and could still relate to the Norwegian way of life. This would have made it possible for them to return to Norway and easily adapt to the environment.

Strong, able-bodied Greenlanders of child-bearing age would have been the first to abandon life on the island. They would have left their childhood homes and families to seek opportunities elsewhere. In the same way that Erik and his followers came to Greenland looking for a better life, the more adventurous Greenlanders were later forced to leave the island to make a better life for themselves. Erik the Red would probably have been sad to see his descendants dispersed and his colony abandoned, but he would surely have admired the tenacity and spirit of the Greenlanders who, like him, were not afraid to leave their homeland and build new lives elsewhere.

Timeline for the Viking Age of Exploration

The exact dates of the major milestones are not recorded, but a timeline can be drawn up that approximates the most important dates.

Circa 860 – The first Norsemen reach Iceland

Circa 870 – A Norse colony is established on Iceland

Between 950 and 960 - Erik Thorvaldsson, better known by his nickname Erik the Red, is born in Rogaland on the southwestern coast of Norway. He is the son of Thorvald Asvaldsson.

Circa 960 - Thorvald Asvaldsson commits murder and is banished from Norway. He takes his family to Iceland and settles in Hornstrandir.

Circa 970 - Erik the Red's second son, Leif Erikson, is born in Iceland

Circa 980 - Erik the Red fights with his neighbors and is convicted of killing Eyiolf the Foul. He is banished from Haukadal and moves further north to Oxney with his family. **Circa 982** - Erik is again found guilty of killing his fellow Norsemen and is banned from Iceland for three years

982 to 985 - Erik and his crew explore Greenland

Circa 985 - Erik returns to Iceland

Summer 986 - Erik the Red sets sail with 25 ships and approximately 300 followers to establish a settlement on Greenland. Only 14 ships survive the voyage. The Vikings form two settlements in Greenland.

Circa 999 – Erik's son, Leif Erikson, sails to Norway. In Norway, Leif Erikson spends the winter in the household of King Olaf Tryggvason and is converted to Christianity.

Circa 1000 –Leif Erikson returns to Greenland, but soon afterward, he takes a small group of Vikings and sets sail on a voyage of discovery to the North American continent. Leif and his crew establish a small settlement in an area that he calls Vinland, which historians believe could be modern-day Newfoundland.

Circa 1002 – Erik the Red dies in Greenland during an epidemic

Circa 1003 – Leif leaves the settlement at Vinland and returns to his father's estate at Brattahlid in Greenland. He becomes chief of the Eastern Settlement and never returns to Vinland.

Between 1004 and 1010 – The Greenlanders make more voyages to Vinland. Erik the Red's son, Thorvald, is killed by the local inhabitants in North America and is the first European to die on the continent.

Circa 1010 – The settlement at Vinland declines and fails mainly due to attacks from indigenous tribes and unsustainability

Circa 1025 – Erik's son, Leif Erikson, dies and his grandson, Thorkel Leifson, becomes chief of the Eastern Settlement

Between the 15th and 17th Century – The Norse settlements in Greenland decline and are eventually abandoned

Chapter Nineteen: Viking Society and Everyday Life

The Vikings were not just a bunch of hooligans running amok in Europe, raiding and plundering. They were part of a complex and well-ordered society. The average Norseman spent most of his life farming, trading, or working as a craftsman. The men were blacksmiths, fur traders, hunters, farmers, fishermen, and shipbuilders. They worked the land and grew crops such as wheat, barley, and rye, and tended to their livestock.

Norse society had three tiers. On the top were jarls, who were wealthy men who owned property and ships. Early in the Viking Age, there were no national kings but rather many chieftains who controlled smaller areas. As the Viking Age progressed, power became centralized in the hands of a few strong leaders, and they became the kings of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark in the 9th century. As these kings rose to power in Scandinavia, the jarls became aristocrats who were subordinate to the kings and held land for them at their pleasure. In peacetime, the jarls oversaw the management of their own lands, and during war or on raiding expeditions they commanded the longboat crews. Jarls also protected the honor, prosperity, and security of their followers, and in return, their followers supported them, went on raids, and followed their jarl into battle.

Like the jarls, the kings were also drawn from the nobility or ruling class. In Norse society, the king was not viewed as special or divine, and the position of king was not necessarily guaranteed through succession. A son could inherit his father's throne, but it was not a given. Norse kings were expected to be strong, brave, generous, and fearless in battle. A weak or unpopular monarch could be replaced by a rebellion or an election if the jarls united behind a rival claimant. If the king was not strong enough to ensure the loyalty of the jarls, then he would be replaced. In this way, a jarl might become strong and rich enough to make himself a king, but he could also move down the ranks and become a karl if he lost his fortune. Odin was the principal god of the upper classes, and they would strive to emulate his wisdom, vast knowledge, and creative spark.¹

The next rung in Viking society were the karls. The karls, or Norse middle class, were farmers, fishermen, and craftsmen. On raiding expeditions or during war, they were the rank and file of the Viking army and they crewed the longboats. Many young karls went on raiding expeditions to increase

their wealth so that they could buy land and perhaps even increase their social standing. In some cases, they even became jarls. Inheritance customs in the Viking world typically meant that the older son would inherit most of his father's fortune. This meant that Viking raiders were frequently ambitious younger sons who hadn't inherited much and were dissatisfied with their lot in their home countries.² These Viking warriors aspired to as brave as Thor, the principle deity of the middle classes.³ There was a subclass of karls, known as kuskarls (house karls). They served as the personal staff or bodyguards of a jarl or king.

Jarls and karls were free men, but the third strata of Norse society, the thralls, were little more than slaves. This group was predominantly made up of convicted criminals, captives from raiding expeditions, or prisoners of war. Slave trading was still common practice throughout Europe and the Middle East, and many Vikings made their fortunes in the slave trade. They captured young men and women during raids and sold them in the slave markets across Europe. Some thralls were also born into slavery, as the children of thralls were automatically thralls themselves. Thralls had no rights, and the killing of a thrall was considered destruction of property rather than murder. Viking raiders bought and sold slaves and captives from parts of Europe, Britain, and the Middle East, and this meant that the thralls were not one ethnic or cultural group.

Poor Norsemen or women could also become slaves by giving up their freedom in order to pay off their debts. In the same way that a free person could sell themselves into slavery, a thrall could also buy their way out of slavery by selling handicrafts made during their free time. A thrall might move up in society to become a karl, but it is unlikely that they would progress further than that.

A Norseman's position in society was not cast in stone, and as illustrated above, a man could, to some degree, move up and down in Norse society. There were also richer and poorer men in each stratum. Norse women usually had the same status in society as their fathers or husbands and, unlike their counterparts in Christian Europe, could own land and conduct businesses in their own right.

The rule of law, fairness, and justice was extremely important to the Vikings. They had no centralized government but well-established laws formed the root of their society and they lived in orderly, structured

communities. Each small settlement had their own chief. The chief, however, was not all-powerful, and decisions regarding village life were made collectively at a meeting called the “Thing.” The Thing was a public gathering that could be held at any time which gave all freemen in the settlement the opportunity to settle disputes and express their views on certain village matters. The Thing is comparable to a modern-day legislative assembly.

The chief of the settlement ran the Thing, but he and his council could only guide proceedings, as all the freemen in the settlement had the right to take part in the decision-making process. During the Thing, the members of the settlement voted on day-to-day issues, including who owned a portion of land or what punishment an offender would receive if they were found guilty of breaking the law. Once a year the freemen of a settlement gathered for the “Althing.” This was an annual event where new laws were made and the Vikings could vote on important decisions like taxes, peace treaties, and, if necessary, the election of a new chief or king.

The Thing could be called to enforce the law and try men accused of committing crimes. During the Thing, the accused could defend themselves and call witnesses. The rule of law was important to maintain order in the harsh and often violent Viking settlements so punishments could be severe. The ultimate punishment for violent crimes was usually to outlaw, or banish, the guilty. Depending on the crime, the banishment could be permanent or for a set number of years.

Outlaws were forced to flee their villages and hide in the wilderness. Once a Viking was declared an outlaw, anyone was allowed to hunt them down and kill them. Outlaws could also be stripped of all their worldly possessions and property. If a Viking was only outlawed for a predetermined amount of time, they were usually allowed to keep their possessions and return to their homes when their banishment was lifted.

Lesser crimes could be settled by a duel, known as a holmgang. This did not always end well for the victim and justice was not necessarily on the right side, but since the Vikings believed the gods favored the righteous, the outcome was seen to be fair. Land could also be confiscated from the guilty and given to the victim, or the guilty might had to pay compensation to the victim’s family. Money paid to a family of the victim was known as wergild.⁴

One person in every settlement was assigned the duty of law-speaker. This was a very important position because during the early Viking Age there were no law books or written laws. Even though all settlements held their own annual Althing and made their own laws, some laws applied to all Vikings, and the law-speaker had to memorize them all. He had to know the laws of the settlement and those of broader Viking society. If there was any confusion about a law during the Thing or the Althing, the law-speaker would be called upon to explain it. Every Viking settlement had a law-rock, and after new laws were passed, the law-speaker had to go to the law-rock and recite all the laws so that the women, children, and slaves who were not permitted to be present at the Althing would also know the laws.

Every member of the family, from toddler to grandparent, was expected to pull their weight. Boys worked alongside their fathers, plowing land and planting and harvesting crops. Women and girls took care of the family, raised the children, made the clothes, and cooked the meals. Viking food was basic and they had to make do with what they could grow themselves or gather from the surrounding area. Their diet consisted mainly of bread, porridge, cabbage, onions, leeks, and wild berries. They grew crops such as barley, rye, oats, and a variety of vegetables, while cows, sheep, and goats all provided milk, cheese, and butter. While to some modern people, this subsistence lifestyle may sound like some kind of romantic idyll, it was anything but. It was a hard, perilous existence where daily life was often a grueling struggle for survival.

While Viking society was patriarchal, women were seen as valued members of the community and their contribution to Viking life was just as important as that of the men. When the men were away hunting, fishing, trading, or raiding, the women were left in charge of the farms and the households. It then became solely their responsibility to care for the family and oversee all the farm work. They had to ensure that when the men returned the farm was running smoothly. Women also traveled with and worked alongside their husbands to establish new colonies in Iceland and Greenland. Viking women certainly had more power than most European women at the time. They could divorce their husbands, own property, and participate in trade. This enabled some of them to become wealthy in their own right. Viking woman may have had more rights than their European counterparts, but their main task was still that of homemaker.

The homes of the Vikings were rather basic. Vikings lived in single-roomed, low rectangular-shaped dwellings. The interior of a Norse house was plain and basic. A single room, with a reed or flagstone floor, served as both the living and sleeping area for the average Viking family. Damp rose up through the rough walls while the wind whistled through the small openings that served as windows. The smoke from the central cooking hearth swirled around the dark interior of the dwelling before escaping out of a hole in the reed roof. The lodgings may have provided shelter from the harsh weather, but there were few comforts. There would have been a table and a few stools where meals were eaten and rug-covered benches along the walls that served as beds. A wealthier Viking's dwelling may have had what were considered a few more luxuries, but it certainly wouldn't have been grand or lavish by today's standards. A wealthier family's house would have had more than one room, perhaps a few tapestries hanging on the wall, and the family probably slept on straw-stuffed mattresses rather than hard benches. But their houses were still dark, damp, and smoky.

Fortunately, the life of a Viking was not all fighting, work, and drudgery. There was also time for sports and other entertainment. The Vikings enjoyed wrestling, ice-skating, skiing, archery, and falconry. They demonstrated their strength with stone-lifting competitions and enjoyed a game called knattleikr that involved a ball, full-body contact, and at times a bat. These games would surely have provided a welcome respite from working the lands and caring for the livestock. But the games, which were often violent and could result in serious injury or even death, were not just pure entertainment; they also allowed the men to practice vital battle skills and improve their fighting techniques. The games also enabled young boys to learn the skills that they would need to be great Viking warriors and to demonstrate their strength, agility, and battle tactics.

During the long, harsh winters, Norsemen were accustomed to spending much of their time indoors, and board games were a popular pastime. They amused themselves playing dice, chess, and board games like Hnefatafl and Kvadrutafl. Kvadrutafl was a game similar to backgammon, and Hnefatafl was a type of war game that is thought to have helped teach players battle strategies. The Norsemen also enjoyed listening to stories, telling riddles, and playing musical instruments such as harps, horns, and pipes.

Storytelling and the reciting of sagas, especially those about the exploits of Viking heroes, were deeply ingrained in Norse society. During Viking

feasts, Scandinavian bards, called skalds, recited epic poems or sagas that praised the brave deeds of Viking warriors and their prowess in battle. These sagas were important to the Vikings because, before they converted to Christianity, they had no written records of significant events, and their history was passed on through the sagas told by the skalds. This was their only way of preserving their history, so these sagas were often incredibly long and detailed. Some, like the *Saga of Erik the Red* and the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, were eventually written down, but not until long after the events that they describe. Unfortunately, many more were lost to history.

¹ Davis, Graeme; The Cult of Thor (All About History, Issue 057, p35)

² Winroth, Anders. 2014. The Age of the Vikings. p. 164-165

³ Wilson, David M. 1989. The Vikings and Their Origins. p. 114-115

⁴ D.J. Williamson et al; The Rules of Revenge; Viking Justice (All About History, Issue 059) p 29 – 33

Chapter Twenty: Pagan Gods and Norse Mythology

Norse paganism was not a monotheistic religion. In Norse mythology, there were various spiritual beings, including gods, goddesses, giants, elves, dwarves, spirits, and other powerful creatures that influenced the lives of men. There were also various worlds in which all these different beings dwelled.

Asgard, a large fortified castle that floated in the air, was the home of the gods. The gods and goddesses most venerated by the Vikings were Odin, Thor, Loki, Baldur, Frigg, Freya, Freyr, and Njoror. Odin was the ruler of the deities, a powerful war god and seeker of wisdom. He was also the father of Thor who with his magic hammer, Mjolnir, protected mankind and the realm of Midgard where humans lived. Thor was also worshiped as the god of warriors, and Vikings tried to emulate his courage in battle. Loki was a dangerous and mischievous half-god, half-giant who wreaked havoc among the other gods.

Jotunheim, found at the edge of the world, was the home of the giants who caused chaos and destruction throughout the world. The giants were related to the gods but were also their enemies. In Norse legend, Thor hunts giants in order to protect mankind from their chaos and destruction. Besides the gods who lived in the air, and the giants who lived in the world, there were also dwarves who lived underground in Svartalfheim. They were the miners and smiths of the mythological world, but they were not short humans as people tend to imagine, but rather powerful, invisible spiritual beings. The Norsemen also believed in elves, who were demi-gods and land spirits who inhabited everything on land. These land spirits had considerable power over the land and all those who dwelled in it.

As seafarers, one of the gods that they constantly sought to appease was Aegir. As the commander of the sea, Aegir was loved and feared in equal measure by the seafaring Vikings. According to Norse legends, Aegir and his wife, Ran, dwelled in a magnificent feast hall beneath the ocean, with Ran often depicted as drowning unfortunate sailors. When a Norse ship sank, it was believed that the dead sailors would forever dine in Aegir's Hall.

The Vikings actually had a complicated view of the afterlife. Unlike popular culture has led us to believe, they did not simply think that all

warriors who died in battle would reside in Valhalla, the Hall of the Fallen and realm of the god Odin, for eternity. There was, in fact, more than one Land of the Dead in Viking pagan religion.

Unfortunately, Norse mythology is not clear on how a person ended up in one Land of the Dead or another. Warriors who fell in battle were indeed selected to join Odin in Valhalla, where they spent their days fighting one another and committing deeds of great valor, and their nights feasting and drinking. It was believed that Odin gathered these brave warriors around him, not merely as a reward for their bravery and sacrifice, but also so that they could fight alongside him at Ragnarok, a battle during which Odin and his warriors were all doomed to die. It was, however, not exclusively those who died in battle who were welcomed into the halls of Valhalla, but any great warrior or leader who would be useful to Odin at Ragnarok.

The goddess Freya also welcomed the dead to her hall, known as Folkvang, the Field of the People. Unfortunately, very little information exists about Folkvang or who might be chosen to reside there. And of course, Vikings who died at sea might find themselves as guests in the underwater world of Aegir and Ran. The most common Land of the Dead, however, was Hel, an underground world presided over by a goddess of the same name. This was not a place of eternal damnation or torment, like the Christian concept of Hell, but rather a continuation of life in a new place. In Hel, the Vikings believed one would eat, drink, fight, and do all the things that they had done while they were alive.

Until the rise of Christianity, most Vikings believed in and worshiped many Norse gods and deities. They had no churches, temples, or religious buildings, and honored their gods in many different ways. Some of the symbols they used to represent their gods and beliefs can be found carved on rune stones, swords, axes, and other items that have survived from the Viking Age. One such powerful symbol that was displayed by many Vikings was Thor's hammer, Mjolnir. Carvings of Mjolnir can be found on weapons, boats, and Viking jewelry. Many Viking warriors wore a metal medallion of Thor's hammer as a necklace, in the same way that a Christian would wear a cross.

Since the Vikings were accustomed to worshiping many gods, they easily accepted the Christian god alongside their own. And in countries where they settled, like Normandy, Ireland, and throughout the British Isles, they quickly adopted Christianity. The exact reasons for this are unknown. But

as mentioned earlier, trade played a role in the Viking conversion as Christians were not really supposed to trade with pagans. Although a full conversion does not seem to have been demanded of all Scandinavian traders, the custom of “primsigning” (first-signing) was introduced. This was a halfway step, falling short of baptism, but indicating some willingness to accept Christianity, and this was often deemed to be enough to allow trading. It also appears to have been due to political expediency for the Vikings to convert in order to form alliances or sign peace treaties. An example of this is the Treaty of Wedmore signed in 878. The treaty bound the Viking leader Guthrum to accept Christianity, with Alfred of Wessex as his godfather, and Alfred in turn recognized Guthrum as the ruler of East Anglia.¹ Whatever the Vikings reasons for converting at the time, the result was that by the end of the Viking Age, most of Scandinavia had converted to Christianity and the Norse pagan religion had been relegated to the realm of myths and legends.

¹ http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings/religion_01.shtml

Conclusion

During the Viking Age, the Norsemen traveled far and wide. They raided, plundered, conquered, and settled throughout Europe, and their influence on the world can still be felt today.

These were the men and women who used their knowledge of the sea and navigation techniques to sail as far as the North American continent. They used their shipbuilding skills to build swift, shallow-hulled dragon boats, the likes of which had never been seen before, to travel up rivers and raid and plunder far inland. They amassed mighty armies and used their prowess as warriors to conquer large parts of Europe and accumulate great wealth.

Men like Ragnar Lothbrok, Ivar the Boneless, Eric Bloodaxe, Egil Skallagrimsson, Erik the Red, and Leif Erikson, amongst others, all influenced history and changed the world they lived in. And while they were, for the most part, real people, they are also representative of their culture. The names of the common Vikings may have been long forgotten, but their bravery and spirit of adventure lives on in the stories and legends of these great men.

The Vikings had a profound influence on world history during the Viking Age, spreading their culture far and wide. They redefined the borders of the world they lived in and left their mark throughout Europe. Popular culture may predominately portray them as mighty warriors, raiders, and plunderers, but they were also settlers and explorers who exposed the world to Norse culture.

Legends and myths about the Vikings abound, and while they might not always be historically accurate, these stories have kept the memory of the Vikings alive in popular imagination and have made their history appealing to a large number of people, enabling the legacy of the Vikings to survive long after the end of the Viking Age.

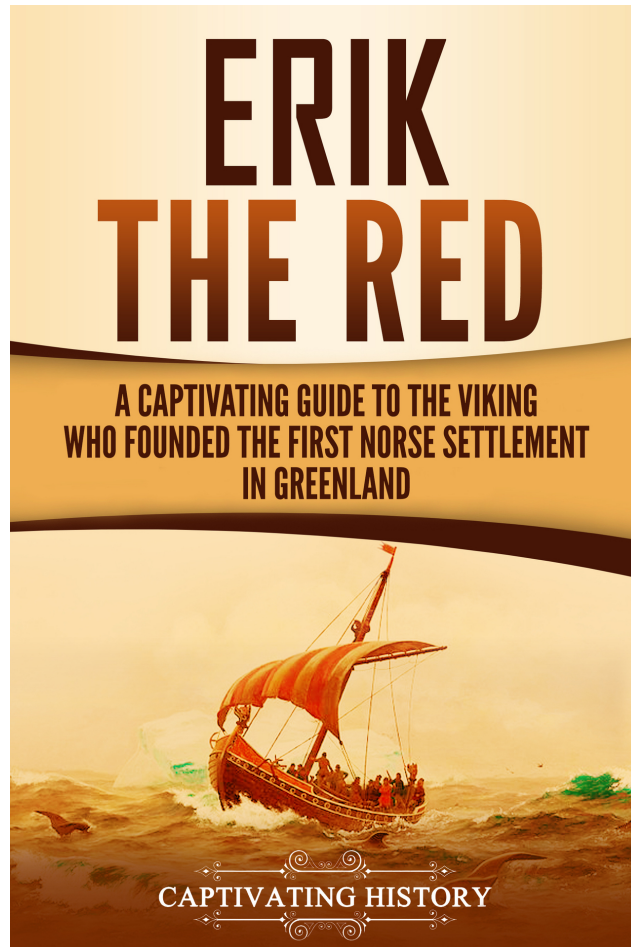
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Part 2: Erik the Red

*A Captivating Guide to the Viking Who Founded
the First Norse Settlement in Greenland*



Introduction

A formidable figure with flaming red hair, a wild beard, and a temper to match is not the type of person most people would choose to cross swords with. And that, by all accounts, is a fitting description of Erik the Red. This was not a man to be taken lightly or challenged in battle. He was courageous on the battlefield, an accomplished seafarer, indomitable warrior, and unstoppable adventurer. In short, Erik the Red was everything we imagine a Viking to be.

He perfectly fits the familiar image of the fearsome Scandinavian warriors who spent their days attacking, raiding, and plundering vulnerable coastal and riverside settlements, and their nights feasting, drinking, and telling tales of their daring exploits. And no doubt Erik did his fair share of raiding, looting, and killing. He was a large, strong Norseman, who could wield a double-edged sword or axe with skill and did not shy away from confrontation. Erik the Red was no doubt a violent man who was not averse to killing, in battle or in the heat of an argument. He would have joined his fellow Norsemen as they ruthlessly preyed on weaker communities, small settlements, churches, and monasteries. He most likely stood at the helm of a light, shallow-hulled dragon boat as it traveled upriver to swiftly attack an unsuspecting community and then sail away with a boatload of loot before any effective defense or counter-attack could be launched. But that is only part of the picture. There was so much more to Erik the Red and his fellow Vikings than the popular image of ruthless men who showed their victims no mercy.

Vikings were, for the most part, farmers and traders who for various reasons, mostly commercial, took to raiding towns, churches, and monasteries, as a part-time activity. They usually returned to their farms in time for the harvest, and Erik the Red was no different. He was a typical Norse farmer who took part in raiding expeditions when he wasn't needed on the farm and later became a famous Viking explorer who established the first European settlement on the island of Greenland.

Chapter 1 – Erik the Red’s Early Life in Norway

Erik Thorvaldsson, better known by his nickname Erik the Red, was the son of a Norwegian farmer, Thorvald Asvaldsson. Not much is known about Thorvald Asvaldsson or Erik’s early life in Norway. It was probably the typical life of a Norwegian farmer, working the land and caring for the livestock. There is no information about Erik’s siblings or other family members; not even his mother’s name is recorded in the Nordic sagas.

What is known is that Erik was born sometime around 950 CE in Rogaland on the southwestern coast of Norway, and at the age of about ten, he traveled with his family to Iceland. This was not a voluntary relocation. Thorvald moved with his family to Iceland out of necessity rather than desire. He may have been the father of one of the greatest Norse explorers, but he does not appear to have been an adventurous man himself. He wasn’t seeking to carve out a niche for himself in the colonies, nor was he a man with strong political ambitions who was seeking fame and fortune; Thorvald was a man on the run. He was forced to flee Rogaland after he was banished or outlawed¹ from Norway for killing another Viking.

At the time when Erik the Red was born, the Vikings had a reputation for ruthlessness and lawlessness, but Norse society was actually highly regulated, and they had well-established laws and governance. Vikings may not have been averse to violence and killing, but they lived within a structured society² in their own settlements and criminal behavior did not go unpunished.

When Thorvald Asvaldsson murdered a fellow Norseman, he was tried at the Thing and found guilty by his fellow Norsemen. As a result, he was banished from Norway. Under Norse law this was the ultimate punishment for Thorvald Asvaldsson and, by extension, his family. He had to forfeit all his property and was forced to flee, not only from his village, but from Norway itself. Fortunately for Thorvald Asvaldsson, he lived during the Viking Age, a time of Scandinavian exploration and expansion which meant that he had options. The most obvious answer to his predicament was to take his family and flee to the newly established settlement on Iceland.

¹ *Viking law was well established and was the root of their government. The Vikings did not have a central government, but the rule of law, fairness, and justice was important to them. They lived in an ordered and structured society made up of small settlements, and each settlement had a chief.*

Decisions regarding village life were made at the “Thing.” The Thing can be compared to a legislative assembly. The chief of the settlement ran the Thing, but he and his council could only guide the Thing, and all free men had the right to take part in the decision-making process. At a Thing, the members of a settlement voted on day to day issues, including who owned a piece of land or what punishment a person would receive if they were found guilty of breaking the law.

A Thing was a public gathering that could be held at any time, and gave all free men in a settlement the opportunity to settle disputes and express their views on certain matters. Once a year the clan gathered for the Althing. This was an annual event where new laws were made and the Vikings could vote on important decisions like taxes, peace treaties, and the election of a new chief.

The Vikings had no law books and the laws were not written down, but one person in every village was assigned the duty of law-speaker, a very important position in a settlement. Some laws applied to all Vikings, but others were specific to the settlement and the law-speaker had to know them all. He had to memorize the laws of the settlement and the broader Viking laws. If there was any confusion about a law during the Thing, the law-speaker would explain the law. After new laws were passed at the Thing, the law-speaker had to go to the law rock and recite all the laws so that the women, children, and slaves who were not present at the Thing would also know the laws.

The Thing was not only a time to make new laws but also to enforce the law and try men accused of committing crimes. During the Thing, the accused could defend themselves and call witnesses. The rule of law was important to maintain order in the harsh and often violent Viking settlements so punishments could be severe. The ultimate punishment for violent crimes was usually to outlaw or banish the guilty. Outlaws that were banished were forced to flee their villages and hide in the wilderness because anyone was allowed to hunt down and kill an outlaw. Outlaws also lost all their worldly possessions and property. Depending on the crime, the banishment could be permanent or for a set number of years. If a Viking was only outlawed for a certain time, they were usually allowed to keep their possessions and return to their homes when they had served their time. Lesser crimes could be settled by a duel, known as a holmgang. This did not always end well for the victim and justice was not necessarily on the right side, but since the

Vikings believed the gods favored the righteous, the outcome was seen to be fair justice. Land could also be confiscated from the guilty and given to the victim, or the guilty might had to pay compensation to the victim's family. The money paid to the family of the victim was known as wergild.

² *Norse society basically had three tiers. Jarls were the nobility and kings were drawn from this stratum of society. In Norse society, the position of king was not always guaranteed through succession. A weak or unpopular king could be unseated by the jarls, if they united behind a rival claimant. If a king was not strong enough to ensure the loyalty of the jarls, then he could be replaced by a rebellion. In peacetime the jarls oversaw the running of their lands, and during war and raids they commanded the longboat crews. The jarls venerated the god Odin for his wisdom and knowledge. The karls or Norse middle class were farmers, fishermen, and craftsmen. On raids or during wars, they crewed the longboats and were the rank and file of the Viking army. The kuskarls (house karls) served a jarl or king on his personal staff or as bodyguards. Thor was a principle deity of this class and was venerated for his honor and bravery as a warrior. The third strata of Norse society were the thralls, who were little more than slaves, convicted criminals, or captives from raids. Thralls had no rights and the killing of a thrall was considered destruction of property rather than murder. Viking raiders bought and sold slaves and captives from parts of Europe, Britain, and the Middle East so the thralls were not one ethnic or cultural group and could come from anywhere.*

Chapter 2 – The Settlement of Iceland and the Viking Age

The settlement of Iceland took place during the Viking Age (793-1066 AD). This was a time of great exploration and expansion for the Scandinavian countries. The Vikings crossed the treacherous oceans and high seas in all directions to conquer, colonize, and spread their influence throughout Europe and the Middle East. These fearsome warriors raided, plundered, terrorized, and attacked settlements up and down the coast of the British Isles, France, Italy, and Russia, and due to their well-designed longboats, they were also able to travel up rivers and attack communities farther inland. There are no simple explanations for what gave rise to this extraordinary age of exploration and conquest, but what we do know is that by the early 790s the Vikings were no longer content to remain in their homelands as farmers and craftsmen, and many left the shores of their homelands.

During this time, they began raiding settlements throughout Europe, often targeting Christian institutions. As pagans, the Vikings had no qualms about attacking wealthy, but vulnerable, Christian churches and monasteries. When the Vikings realized how lucrative plundering could be, they began to venture farther and farther away from home, and in the process, they explored and colonized new lands and expanded their territory. The Vikings were not just opportunistic attackers who launch blitz attacks on unsuspecting communities and then disappeared into the mist; they also integrated into European and Middle Eastern communities and spread their culture far and wide.

The Swedes mostly traveled east to Russia, the Danes went to England and France, and the Norwegians crossed the North Sea to the British Isles and the Norwegian Sea eventually ending up on the shores of Iceland. The first Norsemen reached Iceland around 860, and a man called Floki Vilgeroarson was so dismayed by the harshness of the climate that he named the frozen, snow-covered island Iceland. But prospective settlers were not deterred by the name, and the first wave of Norsemen began moving to Iceland during the 870s.

The first Viking settlers in Iceland came predominantly from the area around Bergen in Norway. Their main reason for leaving Bergen was most likely to escape the draconian rule of King Harald Fairhair, the first king of

Norway. Harald may have managed to unify Norway, but he was not a popular king among all his subjects. He instituted widespread administrative and land reform and ordered the payment of land taxes. This did not endear him to the predominately farming population and he was labeled a tyrant. During Harald's reign, many Norwegians fled Norway to seek new opportunities in places like the Hebrides, Orkney, Shetlands, and Iceland. Other settlers also moved to Iceland from various parts of Scandinavia and even from the British Isles (a number of Celts probably came with the Vikings as spouses and slaves). By the middle of the tenth century, Iceland had thousands of inhabitants.

Tyrannical rule was one reason why many Norsemen were no longer happy to remain in their homelands. Another reason for Norse migrations during this time could have been the practice of primogeniture. This meant that the oldest son inherited everything and there was no land for younger sons, so they had to look elsewhere for places to settle and make their fortune. But, of course, there were many other reasons why the Vikings were prepared to take their families away from their well-established villages and start new colonies in cold and often inhospitable environments. Some were undoubtedly seeking fame and fortune. Others perhaps were running away from a life that no longer satisfied them or trying to escape justice.

New territories offered the Norsemen more resources and greater political freedom. In new settlements and more remote territories, there were fewer laws, taxes, and social constraints. Parts of Scandinavia were also becoming overpopulated and new territories offered the more adventurous Vikings access to a better life. Uninhabited territories, such as Iceland and Greenland, which lay across the North Sea offered an abundance of natural resources, farmland, and grazing for livestock, as well as the opportunity for settlers to increase their wealth and power. As in most cases of mass migration, it was probably a combination of factors that drove the Vikings across the ocean, including necessity and advancing technology.

Technology definitely played a part in the Viking Age of expansion. During this time, the Scandinavians were the most advanced shipbuilders and navigators in Europe, and they were able to cross many nautical miles of open seas in their longboats. Although no written historical records about the settlement of Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland (a brief Viking settlement on the North American continent) exist from the time, the sagas that were written some two hundred years later do give us some insight into how the

Vikings were able to traverse the treacherous ocean to reach these remote areas.

The Vikings may not have had any of the navigational tools, such as computers and GPS technology, that are available to modern sailors, but they had a rich maritime tradition and an outstanding knowledge of the sea. They didn't even have access to a basic compass, but their knowledge of coastlines, currents, navigational markers, whales, and seabirds all played a role in their navigational techniques and enabled them to form mental maps of their journeys. These skills were passed on from one generation to the next, and each generation would have improved their navigational techniques and built on the knowledge acquired from their fathers and grandfathers. Erik the Red was no exception. He would have learned many of the skills he needed to make the crossing between Iceland and Greenland from his father, who most likely learned from his father. During the Asvaldsson family's initial voyage from Norway to Iceland, Erik (who was only a ten-year-old boy at the time) would have been exposed to his first major sea voyage. They no doubt would have encountered some rough seas and bad weather and Erik would have seen how to handle adverse conditions; he would also have learned some basic navigational skills.

Norsemen used their five senses, practical experience, and to some degree intuition to aid navigation on the open waters. Along coastlines and in sight of land they would use navigational markers, such as hills or unusually shaped rock formations, to ascertain their position and the direction in which they wished to sail. They also used nature and the abundance of sea life to aid navigation. The sailors would observe whales swimming or feeding in certain areas or currents. They knew that at certain times of year whales would be found in particular parts of the ocean so they could use whale pods to orientate themselves. The Vikings had to be able to find their way to shore even through dense fog and many Vikings would identify different bird calls, the sounds of waves breaking on the shore, or smell land long before they saw the actual coastline. In this way they could guide their longboats safely home and avoid dangerous, rocky shorelines.

They may also have used simple tools such as a plumb bob (a weight on the end of a line) to measure ocean depth and a basic latitude finder that floated in a bucket of water. This comprised of a circle of wood with a perpendicular stick of wood (or gnomon) stuck into it. The sun cast the gnomon's shadow on the circle of wood and helped the Vikings determine

latitude. But the Vikings also had to be able to find their way in cloudy weather and one possible navigational tool that they could have used to do this was a crystal known as a “sunstone.” These sunstones are mentioned in the Saga of King Olaf and were apparently key to navigating in poor weather. Sunstones split a beam of light, separating polarized light from the main beam. By looking at the sky through these crystals, it is possible to see the rings of polarized light that surround the sun even on cloudy days. Being able to identify the sun’s location would have given the Vikings a point of reference during long ocean crossings.

Master shipbuilders were another tool in the Viking arsenal. The typical Norse vessel was clinker built. This meant that the planks of the hull were not laid edge to edge but rather overlapped each other. The seams between the planks were caulked over with tar-soaked animal hair. This design made the longboats both strong and flexible. The shipbuilders predominately used oak as it was very durable but other types of timber were also used. These vessels, rigged with large square sails made of rough cloth and fitted with between 6 and 30 rowing benches, were able to cross the treacherous waters of the open ocean where ice floes, icebergs, and frozen rigging were a constant danger. The longboats were an integral part of Viking life and the Norsemen took pride in their vessels; they gave them names, decorated them with carvings, and adorned them with dragon heads.

The Vikings used their vessels to great effect to raid, plunder and spread their influence throughout the known world. Russia, Europe, the British Isles, and the Middle East all fell victim to Viking raiding parties. The long, narrow, light boats with their shallow hulls could not only cross oceans but could also sail upriver to attack inland settlements. The longboats were fast and easy to maneuver and could glide easily through deep or shallow waters, making quick getaways after surprise attacks on vulnerable settlements. The longboats, with their dragon heads and drawings of wild animals on the sails, were also frightening to behold, and the Vikings utilized them to help conquer everything in their path. They captured Limoges, Toulouse, and Bordeaux. They sailed a fleet of warships up the Seine and took Paris, Beauvais, and Meaux.

While the Vikings reputation as fearsome warriors preceded them, they did not spend their entire lives raiding and plundering, and their longboats were not only tools of war. The Vikings also built boats that could be used to trade, explore, and settle new territories. Most Norsemen were not warriors,

and robbing and plundering was not their main source of income. Most Norsemen were farmers and craftsmen who during times of war would be called upon to crew the longboats. During the Viking Age, they also took to plundering to increase their wealth, but for the most part they spent their time with their families, trading, working the land, raising livestock, and practicing their crafts.

Erik the Red was a true Viking, and this meant that he was an accomplished seafarer who knew how to command a crew and handle a longboat. By the time that he sailed to Greenland, he would have had much practice navigating and he would have used all the navigational tools at his disposal to make his way from Iceland to Greenland and back again. Like his father before him, Erik no doubt taught his children to be expert seafarers and navigators. He would have passed on the skills, not only to his son, Leif Erikson, who became a famous explorer, but to all his children, including his daughter, Freydis. Following in Leif's footsteps, all three his siblings attempted to make the Atlantic crossing from Greenland to Vinland and return with cargos of grapes and timber.

Chapter 3 – Erik's Early Years in Iceland

Erik the Red may have spent the first ten years of his life in Norway but for all intents and purposes he grew up in Iceland. The Viking community on Iceland was relatively new when Thorvald settled with his family on those icy shores, but all the best land was already occupied. They found a place to settle at Hornstrandir in the more remote and newly colonized northwestern part of the island. This is where Erik became a man. It was in this harsh and unforgiving land that he learned the skills that he would need later in life when he and his followers settled in Greenland. Growing up in a newly colonized territory, combined with the hunting, fishing, and farming techniques that he learned from his father, was undoubtedly a great asset for Erik when it came time for him to establish a settlement in Greenland. He would have worked tirelessly alongside his father to build a new homestead for their family in Iceland. He would have prepared the land, planted seeds, and harvested crops. These were skills every Norseman learned from a young age. Being a successful Viking meant not only knowing how to wield a sword but also how to support your family.

Life was good in Iceland for the Asvaldsson family in the beginning. Thorvald became well established in Hornstrandir and the family adjusted to life in the new settlement. They lived like typical Vikings and continued with most of their Norse traditions. Thorvald and his family would have lived in a typical Scandinavian-style house, which would have been a long, low dwelling. In Iceland, the houses were mostly built of timber and lined with clay or turf. The slanted roofs, supported by two rows of internal posts, were usually made of reeds or in some instances wood. The interior of the house would have been basic with minimal furnishings and a rectangular fireplace in the middle of a communal family space.

The fireplace was used for cooking food, heating water, and warming the house. A basic house, the type that Erik most likely would have lived in when his family initially settled in Iceland, had only one room and there would have been wooden benches along the wall where the family would sit and sleep. A bigger house, belonging to a wealthier landowner and that Erik most certainly built in Greenland, would have had separate sleeping quarters. In the cold northern climate, animals could not spend the entire winter outdoors, and if the farm had no stables or barn, then there would be stalls for the livestock at one end of the longhouse. Because of the harsh

winters in the Scandinavian countries, Viking houses needed constant repair and the damp was a perpetual problem, making the houses cold and causing the timber walls to rot.

Viking dwellings may have provided shelter from the elements, but they were far from luxurious and the average Norse family did not live in comfort. Besides the smell from the animals living at one end of the dwelling, the houses were smoky. There were no windows and what little ventilation there was provided by small openings in the walls and a hole in the roof.

Norse farmers lived in small villages or settlements that consisted of six or seven farms clustered together around a common area. The dwelling and outbuildings usually formed the center of the farm. Outbuildings on Norse farms were spaces for various farm-related activities, such as barns for storing grain, stables for the livestock and basic workshops for making and repairing tools. Wealthier farmers would have more outbuildings, but poor farmers might only have had one building on their farm and they would have had to use this as living quarters, stables and a workshop.

Erik grew up on a typical Icelandic farm, and by the time he was twelve, he was considered a man and would have been expected to do his fair share of the hard, physical work that was required to run the farm and feed the family. The farm had to produce enough produce and crops to sustain the entire household and feed the livestock. Because the winters were so harsh in Iceland, farmers had to produce enough hay to feed their cattle through the winter. The Vikings grew many crops, including barley, rye, oats, and a variety of vegetables. Cows, sheep, and goats all provided milk for the family and the women would have made cheese and butter from it.

Every member of the family, from toddler to grandparent, worked. Boys were expected to work alongside their fathers and girls helped their mothers. Viking society was patriarchal, so when the men were at home, they took care of the farming and the women did the domestic chores. But Viking women were just as capable as their menfolk and they were valued members of society. Their contributions were just as important as the men's. When the men were away hunting, fishing, trading, or raiding, the women were left in charge of the farms and the households. It then became solely their responsibility to care for the family and oversee all the farm work. They had to ensure that when the men returned the farm was running smoothly. Women also traveled with and worked alongside their husbands

to establish new colonies in Iceland and Greenland. Viking women certainly had more power than most European women at the time. They could divorce their husbands, own property, and participate in trade. This enabled some of them to become wealthy in their own right.

All the men and boys in the settlements would have taken part in the typical Viking pursuits. Erik's father and other male members of the community would have taught Erik how to fish, hunt, and fight. When Vikings weren't farming or plundering other settlements, they occupied their time with sports and games. The games provided much-needed respite from daily life, but they were also designed to allow the men to demonstrate their masculinity and hone their battle skills and fighting techniques. As a result, the games were usually rough and highly competitive, and it wasn't unheard of for men to sustain serious injury or even be killed. Erik the Red is described as a large, formidable man and he no doubt excelled at physical games, like stone lifting competitions, wrestling, tug of war, swordplay, and knattleikr, a game that involved a ball, a stick, and full-body contact. Women did not partake in these sports, but they were welcome as spectators to cheer on the men.

The one competition that men and women took part in together was drinking. The Vikings enjoyed drinking games where men and women would form teams and each team would drink, boast, and insult the opposing team. The aim of the game was to see which team could drink the most and still remain articulate enough to come up with witty insults.

Board games were also a popular pastime, especially during the long, cold winters when families were forced to spend long hours indoors. A common game was Hnefatafl. This was a game of strategic skill that involved two players. One player had to corner the king while the other had to defend the castle. Another favorite was Kvatrutafl, a game similar to backgammon. These games helped pass the time, but they also taught young Vikings valuable strategic lessons that they could apply in battle.

Farming, fishing, and battle skills were not the only things that Erik learned from his father. Thorvald Asvaldsson was a man who was not opposed to violence and this undoubtedly made an impression on the young Erik. He experienced how his father used violence to settle his differences in Norway. But this was not unusual behavior for the time. Viking society in general was harsh and violent, and ruthless warriors took what they wanted at the point of a sword. Growing up in this type of culture would have had a

lasting effect on the development of Erik the Red's character. By all accounts he grew up to have a volatile nature and a fiery temper. This, along with his father's propensity for violence, did not bode well for Erik in the long term. Here was a boy with a short temper who was growing up in a hard, violent environment. Ultimately, like his father, Erik was not opposed to killing, and once he was a grown man, it didn't take long before he followed in his father's murderous footsteps.

Chapter 4 – Murder Most Foul

By all accounts, life was good for Erik in Iceland until the 980s. After the death of his father, Erik married Thjodhild Jorundsdottir and together they moved to Haukadal. Thjodhild came from a wealthy family, and it is believed that the property where they settled after their marriage may have been part of the marriage dowry or an inheritance from her family.

Most Vikings married young. Brides could be as young as twelve, and by the age of twenty, most Viking men and women were already married. Marriages were usually arranged by the parents and a marriage was seen not only as a union between husband and wife, but as a contract between two families. When the parents agreed on a marriage, the groom's family paid a bride price, and when the marriage took place, the bride's father paid a dowry. This meant that both families had a financial interest in the marriage.

Erik had made a good marriage for himself and at Haukadal, with Thjodhild by his side, he prospered. He owned a number of thralls, built a farm called Eiriksstadir, and started a family. Erik and Thjodhild had four children who survived to adulthood: three sons, Thorvald, Leif, and Thorstein, and a daughter, Freydis. For a while the family was doing well and life was good, but unfortunately things were not destined to stay that way for long.

Erik was known to have a fiery temperament and he did not always get along well with his neighbors so it didn't take long for an argument to develop between Erik the Red and one of his fellow settlers. By this time, Erik had become a prosperous man and he owned a number of thralls who worked for him on his farm. One day several of his thralls were working the land when they accidentally triggered a landslide that crushed his neighbor Valthjof's house. One of Valthjof's clansmen, Eyiolf the Foul, then killed Erik's thralls. This is when Erik's fiery temper got the better of him and in retaliation, Erik killed Eyiolf the Foul and another man named Holmgang-Hrafn. Eyiolf's family demanded that Erik be outlawed from Haukadal. The Thing was held and a decision was made to banish Erik from Haukadal. Erik had to leave his prosperous farm and move his family farther north to the Icelandic island of Oxney.

But this altercation with Eyiolf the Foul and his kinsmen was only the beginning of Erik's troubles in Iceland. Sometime around 982, Erik entrusted his setstokkr,³ that his father had bought from Norway and Erik

had inherited from him, to his friend and fellow settler, Thorgest, for safekeeping while he built his new home. As the story goes, when Erik's house was complete, he returned to claim his setstokkr but Thorgest refused to give them back. Erik then took the setstokkr by force (it is unclear whether the setstokkr he took were his own or ones that belonged to Thorgest) and set off back to his own farm. However, Erik was a savvy man and an experienced warrior who was not going to be caught off guard by retaliation from Thorgest. Instead of returning directly to his farm, Erik set up an ambush and laid in wait to see if Thorgest and his men would pursue him. They did and during the ensuing fight, two of Thorgest's sons were killed, apparently by Erik. This act could not go unpunished, and once again Erik's fate was decided by the village men at the Thing. Erik was found guilty of murder and this time he was outlawed not just from Oxney but from the entirety of Iceland. This meant that he could not merely move his family to another part of the island.

This was the second recorded time that Erik was found guilty of murdering a fellow Iclander and the Thing could easily have decided to banish him for life. He was, by all accounts, a difficult man, known to have a fiery temper and altercations with his neighbors, so there certainly would have been cause to completely outlaw him. Being outlawed was a terrible punishment for any Viking as it left them not only at the mercy of the elements but also at the mercy of other Vikings and outlaws. Fortunately, Erik was able to persuade the Thing to only banish him from Iceland for three years and to allow his family to keep his land and possessions while he was outlawed. Here one gets a glimpse of the powers of persuasion that Erik later employed so effectively to get people to follow him to Greenland a few years later.

³ *Wood carving was one of the key artistic expressions of Viking Age art and craftsmanship. They were master carpenters who carved mighty dragon heads for their longboats and toys for their children. Their mastery of wood can also clearly be seen in the carving of setstokkr. Setstokkr were large beams with Viking symbols carved on them and they held mystical value for the Vikings as part of their pagan religion. These carved beams held great personal and spiritual value for their owners.*

Chapter 5 – Erik the Explorer

Erik the Red would have been a fearsome sight at the head of any Viking raiding party, striking fear into the hearts of vulnerable coastal settlements. But his biggest contribution to world history was not as a Viking warrior but rather as an explorer and the founder of the first European settlement in Greenland.

Here it is important to give credit where credit is due and mention that Erik the Red was actually not the first European to discover the landmass he named Greenland. That honor should most likely go to an Icelandic settler named Gunnbjorn Ulfsson. While sailing to Iceland, Ulfsson was blown off course during a storm and saw the shores of Greenland. However, he did not make landfall on the island but instead continued on his voyage. Erik may not have discovered Greenland, but he was most certainly the first European to create a permanent settlement on this remote island. This was definitely no small accomplishment, as Greenland was certainly not a green and pleasant land, but rather a cold and snowy place with ice floes, glaciers, and only a relatively small amount of arable land.

After Erik was found guilty of killing his fellow Norsemen for the second time, he decided it was best for him not to remain in Iceland while he was outlawed. Had he stayed on the island he would have lived a life on the run for three years. This clearly was not something Erik was prepared to do. It appears that he was an ambitious man with a strong character, and he wasn't just going to disappear quietly into obscurity or risk being killed by another Iclander. He decided he would rather take his chances at sea and use his time in exile to his advantage, exploring the ocean surrounding Iceland.

In 982 Erik and his crew set sail from Sneefellsjokull, planning to locate and explore the landmass that was rumored to lie to the west of Iceland.⁴ He braved the icy waters of the rough Atlantic and traveled the approximately 180 miles to the shores of Greenland. His first sight of Greenland would most likely have been the towering outline of the east Greenland coast, but he would not have been able to land there because of the great masses of ice along the shoreline. For many people this would have been a daunting sight and maybe even enough to make them rethink their goals, but not Erik. Erik was not deterred by his first sight of this icy landscape. Besides, he had

three years to fill before he could return to Iceland, so there really was no turning back for him.

This landmass that Erik encountered, explored, and colonized during his three years of exile is in fact the largest island in the world (Australia and Antarctica are considered continents). Greenland is the twelfth largest country on Earth but has always been sparsely inhabited because more than 75% of its total area is covered by an ice sheet and settlement is only possible along the ice-free coast that is mainly found on the west side of the island. Located between the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans, Greenland is a giant landmass that covers a total area of 836,109 square miles, has a coastline of 27,394 miles, and is physiographically part of the North American continent. (Therefore, by strict definition one could argue that Erik the Red established the first settlement on the North American continent but that is an argument best left to historical scholars.)

When Erik first arrived in Greenland, his main concern would have been finding a place to spend the winter. When they couldn't make landfall on the eastern side of the island, Erik and his crew continued their voyage, rounded Cape Farewell, and sailed until they found a place to go ashore on the west coast of the island. Erik is a good example of turning adversity into triumph. Once he reached the shores of Greenland, he made the most of his forced exile and spent the next three years thoroughly exploring the island and determining whether it would be a good place to settle, not just temporarily but permanently. The Norsemen spent the summers exploring the uninhabited land and the winters in more sheltered areas.

According to the Saga of Erik the Red,⁵ the Norsemen spent the first winter at a place they named Eiriksey (Erik's Island). When the spring came and the ground thawed slightly, they set about exploring the vast landmass. They traveled up the fjords and moved farther inland to a place that Erik named Eriksfjord. Here they found arable land and lush grazing. The second winter they spent in another area, this time Erik used the name Eiriksholmar. Later they explored as far north as Snaefell and Hrafnshjard. Erik named many places, mostly after himself. This gives one some idea of Erik's character and his belief in his own importance. It might also explain why he didn't always see eye to eye with his neighbors and why starting a new life in a place where he could make the rules would have appealed to a man like Erik the Red.

To modern-day people, Greenland may seem like an odd choice as a place to settle. The climate is harsh and inhospitable and these days there is very little arable land to farm or grazing for livestock. It is estimated that Erik sailed over 6,000 miles during the four sailing seasons that he spent exploring Greenland. The new land that he and his crew found had a similar climate to what they were accustomed to in Iceland. The fjords froze in the winter and snow covered most of the ground, but when spring came and the snow melted, it exposed the lush grazing and arable land that lay beneath the icy layer. Another factor that added to Greenland's appeal was that it was uninhabited. There were no indigenous people or other settlers living around the fjords or along the coast of the southern part of the island. When the Norse established their settlements, they found the remains of earlier Inuit settlements or camps in the area, but they had long since moved on. Many years would pass before the Vikings and the Inuit encountered each other in Greenland but that did not mean that the Norse were not aware of their existence elsewhere. There was definitely contact between the Greenlanders and the Inuit in other areas, and when Leif and other parties traveled to Labrador and the Newfoundland coast, they encountered many indigenous people.

While Erik was exploring Greenland, his family was far from idle. The farm had to be maintained so that the family could sustain themselves and there would be somewhere for Erik to return to once he was no longer outlawed. But when he finally returned, things did not go back to the way they were. By the time Erik came back to Iceland, he had decided that he was going to take his family and start a new settlement in Greenland. But this was too big a task for one family, so Erik had to persuade others to go with him. He may have had a fiery temper and a proclivity for fighting, but he was also clearly a persuasive man and respected leader. Erik managed to convince around three hundred people to accompany him to Greenland and start a new colony. Historians will probably never know exactly how Erik was able to persuade so many people to accompany him on this dangerous and daunting voyage into the unknown. He most likely pointed out the benefits of being the first settlers in a new area; being able to choose the best land, build homesteads in areas of their choice, and having more power and freedom. Some scholars also suggest that he called the island Greenland to make it more appealing to potential settlers.

For Erik, the move to Greenland was most likely an opportunity to increase his wealth and enjoy greater freedom. He had twice been found guilty of killings in Iceland and he may have been seeking a fresh start. His followers' reasons for leaving Iceland were probably as many and varied as the men themselves. Most were probably seeking a better life.

Good, arable land and grazing are always a drawcard for settlers. In an agrarian society, having the best land enables men to increase their wealth and power. The early settlers in Iceland had taken all the best land and those who came later did not have much access to good grazing or vast tracts of land to farm. This meant the latecomers to Iceland may have seen Greenland as a more attractive option. The settlement in Iceland was also relatively new so many of the families there were probably not yet very well established. Greenland would have given them the opportunity to be the first settlers in a new territory and a chance to lay claim to the best land. Another reason for leaving Iceland could have been famine. In 976 Iceland experienced the first great famine recorded in Icelandic history, so many of the people who chose to go with Erik and start again in Greenland would have had nothing to lose.

⁴ *The Hillingar Effect*

Under the right weather conditions, Greenland, even though it is below the geometric horizon, is actually visible from the mountains of northwestern Iceland. Since Erik grew up in Hornstrandir, which is in the remote northwestern part of the island, it is quite possible that he had on occasion seen the landmass that lay to the west of Iceland.

The weather phenomena that makes Greenland visible from Iceland at times is known as an arctic mirage or, in Icelandic, the hillingar effect. There are two types of mirages, the inferior mirage and the superior mirage (hillingar effect). The names do not refer to the size of the mirage but rather to the deceptive position of the image relative to an object's actual position. The hillingar effect is an optical illusion or displacement of an observed image in an upward direction and enables a person to see beyond the horizon.

Mirages are caused when light passes through layers of air of differing densities and the air refracts or bends the light. Superior mirages are most common in the Polar Regions and form when the ground or water surface is significantly colder than the air above it and the temperature inversion

refracts the light towards the colder air, making objects visible above their geographic position.

Mirages trick the brain into thinking it is seeing something that isn't in fact really there or is different from what the brain is interpreting. This phenomenon has given rise to incredible seafaring legends and wild tales of boats that appear to float in the clouds, lands that mysteriously appear and disappear in the mist, and objects that seem to be upside down.

⁵ *The Sagas*

Much of what is known about the history of Greenland and the discovery of Vinland come from two Icelandic sagas, namely the Saga of Erik the Red and the Saga of the Greenlanders. Both sagas are based on stories persevered for generations by oral traditions and were written in Iceland approximately 250 years after the events they describe. While both sagas make reference to Leif Erikson and his voyage to the North American continent and contain similar elements, they also differ greatly. Here is a brief summary of the two sagas.

The Saga of the Greenlanders (Groenlendinga Saga)

The Saga of the Greenlanders not only describes Leif's voyage to Vinland but also subsequent voyages to the new land. According to the Saga of the Greenlanders, Leif's voyage to Vinland was planned and deliberate. The Saga of the Greenlanders describes how Bjarni Herjolfsson accidentally discovers a new land to the west of Greenland in about 986 and how fifteen years later five expeditions are made to Vinland, although one voyage, led by Leif's brother Thorstein, fails to reach its goal. In this version of the discovery of Vinland, Bjarni does not go ashore. He only sees the landmass from his boat but when he realizes it cannot possibly be Greenland because there are no glaciers and ice floes, he sails on without making landfall. When Bjarni finally reaches Greenland, he settles on his father's farm and there he remains. He never attempts to mount an expedition to return to the mysterious land that he had seen. He does, however, tell his story to other settlers on Greenland and this ultimately inspires Leif Erikson, some fifteen years later, to organize an expedition to explore this land. In the Saga of the Greenlanders, Leif is the main explorer of Vinland and he establishes a base camp at Leifsbudir. This serves as a boat repair station, storage area for timber and grapes before they are shipped to Greenland, and a base for subsequent expeditions.

Leif retraces Bjarni's route in reverse, past Helluland (land of flat stone) and Markland (land of forests) before sailing across the open sea for another two days until he finds a headland with an island just offshore and a pool accessible to ships at high tide. Leif and his crew make landfall in the area and establish a base. They name the area Vinland, and the winter is described as mild rather than freezing. It is here that they are reputed to have found an abundance of wild grapes. In the spring Leif returns to Greenland with a boatload of timber and grapes. Leif never returns to Vinland. The second expedition to Vinland is led by Leif's older brother, Thorvald, with a crew of about 40 men. This group spends three winters at the base that Leif had established, Leifsbudir. They explore the west coast of the new land in the first summer and the east coast in the second summer. During their exploration of Vinland they make contact with the local inhabitants that they called Skraelings, and violence breaks out. After killing some Skraelings, the Norse explorers are attacked by a large force and an arrow fatally wounds Thorvald. The following spring the remaining Greenlanders decide to return home. Leif's younger brother, Thorstein, leads a third expedition to Vinland to recover Thorvald's body, but he is driven off course and spends the summer wandering aimlessly in the Atlantic before returning to Greenland, having failed in his mission. The following winter Thorstein dies from illness and his widow, Gudrid, marries Thorfinn Karlsefni, an Icelander. Thorfinn agrees to lead another expedition to Vinland. This is a larger expedition and Gudrid accompanies her husband; they even take livestock with them. Gudrid gives birth to a son, Snorri, in Vinland, but shortly after his birth, the group is attacked by the local inhabitants. They manage to retreat to a defensive position and are able to survive the attack. The following summer they return to Greenland with a cargo of grapes, timber, and hides. Shortly after this, Leif's sister, Freydis, persuades the captain of an Icelandic ship to mount an expedition to Vinland. They set sail in the autumn and spend the winter at Leif's camp but a disagreement between Freydis and the Icelandic captain's leads to the killing of the captains and their Icelandic crews. The Greenlanders then return home with their cargo. This is the last Vinland expedition recorded in the Saga of the Greenlanders.

The Saga of Erik the Red (Erik's Saga)

In this version of the story, Leif accidentally discovers the North American continent on his return to Greenland following a visit to King Olaf

Tryggvason in Norway. Leif spends a winter in the household of King Olaf where he is converted to Christianity. King Olaf then commissions Leif to spread Christianity to Greenland and convert the Greenlanders to the faith. On his return voyage he is blown off course during a storm and makes landfall on a mysterious land where he spends the winter. On his return to Greenland, he brings with him not only the Christian religion but also a cargo of grapes, wheat, and timber. He also rescues survivors from a wrecked ship and this earns him the nickname, Leif the Lucky. The Saga of Erik the Red, like the Saga of the Greenlanders, states that this was the only voyage that Leif made to Vinland. In the spring after Leif returned, his younger brother, Thorstein, leads the next expedition to the new land but is driven off course by a storm and spends the entire summer wandering aimlessly in the Atlantic. He returns to Greenland without ever making it to Vinland. On his return Thorstein marries Gudrid, but he dies of illness in the winter. The following winter Gudrid marries a visiting Icelander named Thorfinn Karlsefni. He agrees to undertake the largest expedition to Vinland. His wife accompanies him on this voyage, and they also take livestock with them. They are accompanied by another pair of Icelanders, Bjarni Grimolfsson and Thorhall Gamlason, as well as Leif's older brother, Thorvald, his sister, Freydis, and her husband, Thorvard. They sail past Helluland and Markland and continue past some extraordinarily long beaches before landing along the coast and sending out two scouts to explore the land. After three days, the scouts return with grapes and wheat. The expedition sails on until they come to an inlet with an island just offshore and there they make camp. This camp is called Straumfjord. The winter is apparently harsh and food is scarce. When spring comes, Thorhall Gamlason wants to sail north to find Vinland but Thorfinn Karlsefni wants to sail southwards. Thorhall takes nine men and sails north, but his vessel is swept out to sea and never seen again. Thorfinn and the rest sail down the east coast with approximately 40 men and establish a camp on the shore of a lagoon. The settlement was known as Hop and there they found an abundance of wild grapes and wheat. How long they stay there is unclear. They have contact with the local people, Skraelings. The first encounter is peaceful, and later they return and trade with the Norse. One day the local people become frightened by the Greenlander's bull and they attack the explorers. The Greenlanders manage to survive the attack by retreating to a more defensive position. After that the explorers abandon their southern

camp and sail north again. Karlsefni and Thorvald Eriksson take a crew and sail in search of Thorhall. They once again have a hostile encounter with the local people and Thorvald is shot with an arrow and dies from his wound. The explorers remain on the continent for one more winter, but the situation is tense and there are disagreements amongst them. The following summer they abandon their venture and start the return voyage to Greenland. This is the last Vinland expedition recorded in the Saga of Erik the Red.

A notable difference between the two sagas is that in the Saga of Erik the Red, Leif's role has been reduced to that of the accidental discoverer of Vinland and Thorfinn Karlsefni is the main explorer of Vinland. Bjarni Herjolfsson's voyage fifteen years earlier is not mentioned. In the Saga of the Greenlanders there are five attempted expeditions to Vinland over the course of a number of years, but in Erik's saga there is only one huge expedition after Leif discovers Vinland. The name Leifsbudir does not appear in the Saga of Erik the Red, and instead there are two camps, Straumfjord (Fjord of Currents) and Hop (Tidal Lagoon). Straumfjord is the main base where the explorers spend the winter. Hop is the summer camp where timber is cut and grapes are collected and then shipped to Straumfjord before being taken to Greenland. The reasons for the differences in the two sagas is unclear. Both were based on oral histories and written long after the actual events so it could be as simple as two different interpretations with different authors placing different emphasis on different events. Bearing in mind that both versions were written by Icelanders that might have had different agendas and the writer of the Saga of Erik the Red may have wanted to make the Icelanders' contribution to the discovery of Vinland the significant part of the story; therefore, Thorfinn Karlsefni's role is greatly embellished and Leif Erikson is only mentioned briefly. The details of the two sagas may differ greatly, but the fundamental premise that Leif Erikson was the first European to land on the North American continent is common to both.

Chapter 6 – Settling in Greenland

Erik spent the winter in Iceland recruiting followers and preparing to return to Greenland, not as an explorer with a crew of hardened men, but as a colonizer with a party of men, women, and children. When Erik persuaded three hundred people to go with him to Greenland, it was not to explore, trade, or gather resources; it was to settle. These people were giving up their entire lives in Iceland to venture into the unknown and start again. That meant that it wasn't just the men that made the voyage; it was entire families and households. Women, children, and thralls all accompanied the men to Greenland. They took with them their household belongings, tools, seeds to grow crops, livestock, and everything they would need to start a new life in a harsh and unsettled territory. This was a major undertaking.

By the summer of 985, Erik and his party were ready to leave the relatively safe haven of Iceland and set sail for the icy and unwelcoming shores of Greenland. Thirty-five ships, loaded with settlers and cargo, left Iceland to start a new life in Greenland. The decision to go to Greenland was one thing; the voyage was quite another, as this was no easy crossing. The settlers had to deal with rough seas, inclement weather, and large icebergs. Ultimately only fourteen vessels made it safely to Greenland. The others were either blown off course and were wrecked or returned to Iceland.

The hardened Norsemen may have been used to treacherous sea crossings and dangerous raiding expeditions, but they were probably all highly relieved to make landfall on the shores of Greenland. They had after all brought their families and all their worldly possessions with them on this voyage and staked their futures on this venture. They certainly had no intention of returning to their old lives in Iceland.

Setting foot on dry land would have been a relief but making the ocean crossing to Greenland was only the beginning for Erik and his followers. Taming the harsh landscape was no mean feat. It took courage, determination, and hard work to survive, and ultimately thrive, in this environment. It also took strong leadership and here Erik the Red excelled. Two settlements were quickly established, about 400 miles apart, on the southwestern part of the island. These settlements were known as the Eastern Settlement or [Eystribyggð](#) (present-day [Qaqortoq](#)) and the Western Settlement or Vestribyggð (close to the present-day capital of [Nuuk](#)). These settlements were not along the coast but farther inland where the land was

protected from the icy waters of the Arctic Sea and the cold foggy coastal weather. No doubt Erik had scouted these locations during his exile and already earmarked the best land for himself.

Soon after the settlers arrived in Greenland, Erik was elected paramount chief of the Eastern Settlement. He was a strong leader and he organized his followers to build homesteads and shelters before the onset of winter. Most built typical low, rectangular single-room Viking houses that they would have shared with their livestock, at least for the first winter. The only difference between the houses found in Greenland and those in other Scandinavian countries was that instead of using timber, the Greenlanders used stone as their primary building material. This would not have been by choice but rather through necessity. There were no great forests on Greenland and stone was far more plentiful than timber.

Erik built a home for his family at a place he named Brattahlid, at the head of Eriksfjord approximately 96 km (approximately 60 miles) from the coast. But this was no single-room dwelling. As the paramount chief Erik would have made sure he displayed his wealth and status. His home would certainly have had more than one room and in Greenland, his family lived liked jarls. Erik used his leadership skills to become a wealthy and powerful man. There are no further recorded incidents of him being accused of murder or fighting with his neighbors. But whether this was because he had matured, the incidents were never recorded, or because he was now chief and no one dared accuse him, we will never know. But what we do know is that Erik and his family continued to prosper in Greenland and the establishment of this new colony appears to have been the right move for him.

From the start of the colony, Greenland's economy was based on farming, fishing, hunting, and trade. The sea around the island was teeming with life, and during the summer each settlement sent men to hunt in Disko Bay above the Arctic Circle. They returned with meat that could be dried and eaten during the long winter months when fresh food was scarce and brought other valuable commodities such as seal pelts and walrus tusks that could be traded and sold to Icelandic traders or when the Greenlanders made trading voyages to Norway. It was primarily this trade between Greenland and Norway that enabled the colony to survive and the settlers to buy the much-needed resources, such as timber for homesteads and shipbuilding, which were not readily available on the island.

Scandinavians wore clothes made of skins, homespun wool, and furs so there was always a market for the polar bear furs, seal pelts, wool, arctic fox furs, and caribou skins that the Greenlanders had almost unlimited access to. The Greenlanders also exported luxuries, such as walrus tusks and unicorn horns, to the royal courts of Europe. Obviously, there were no actual unicorns in Greenland, but the Vikings appeared to have been clever marketers and knew how to sell their products. The so-called “unicorn horn” was actually the tusk of the narwhal. The narwhal is a whale found only in the icy waters of the northernmost oceans. Narwhals are relatively small, and the males have a left canine that twists in a spiral and can grow up to ten feet long. The Europeans highly valued these tusks. They crushed the horns for medicinal purposes, and in the French court, the king’s food was served in unicorn horns.

Chapter 7 – Greenland to Vinland

There were never any great forests on Greenland, but when Erik and his followers first settled on the island, the driftwood was piled high on some of the beaches. Once the Greenlanders started building homesteads, these supplies were, however, soon depleted, and as the population grew, so did the need for timber.

Initially, there might only have been around three hundred settlers in Greenland, but more soon followed and most historians agree that the population could have peaked at as many as five thousand. There would never have been enough natural timber on the island to support a population that size. The few trees that grew naturally on Greenland were mostly birch, and while this made fine firewood, it was good for little else and could certainly not be used to build houses, or more importantly, ships. Homesteads could be constructed with stone and turf, but timber was essential for shipbuilding and ships were the lifeblood of Norse settlements like those on Greenland. Greenlanders were forced to import timber, or in some cases they bought complete ships, directly from Norway. This need for timber was one of the contributing factors for Leif Erikson's iconic voyage to Vinland.

Leif Erikson was Erik the Red's second son, and he became a world-renowned explorer who is most famous for being the first European to set foot on the North American continent. He beat Christopher Columbus by almost half a millennium.

Leif is a formidable and interesting character in his own right, but he was also Erik the Red's son and the two men were clearly cut from the same cloth. It is probably fair to say that without the influence and guidance of Erik the Red, Leif would never have become the man he did, and he might never have made one of the greatest voyages of discovery in Viking Age history.

Leif, like Erik, was a product of his time and upbringing. He was raised by a formidable father, who not only taught him how to survive in a harsh environment but also gave him the confidence and skills he needed to make the voyage to Vinland and return with a boatload of timber and grapes.

It is uncertain how long it took Leif and his crew to sail across the Atlantic, but The Saga of the Greenlanders claims that they made landfall at three different sites. The first place that they are believed to have landed was an

icy and inhospitable region Erikson named “Helluland”. This was a place of flat stone and ice. From there they sailed on until they came to a heavily forested stretch of coastline that they called “Markland”. They did not however choose to establish any sort of settlement there and sailed further south along the coast, quite possibly looking for a more suitable place to build a base camp. Approximately two days later, they came to a headland with an island just offshore. This appeared to be a more hospitable area than Helluland and Markland and Leif decided to build his camp there and named the area Vinland, most likely due to the abundance of wild grapes they found there.

There is much debate as to exactly where Helluland, Markland, and Vinland were. Helluland means “Land of the Stones” or “Flat-Stone Land” and many historians now believe that this was most likely Baffin Island. The second place Leif and his crew made landfall they named Markland which means “Wood Land,” and there were large forests and this is quite possibly Labrador. The exact location of the third landing place, Vinland, remains controversial and it could have been as far north as Newfoundland or as far south as Cape Cod

The discovery and brief attempt to settle Vinland is clearly Leif’s story and legacy, but Erik played a significant role. He not only ensured that his son could fight, hunt, and fish, but he also taught Leif how to navigate when there was no land in sight; an essential skill for anyone hoping to cross the open ocean. Leif’s voyage to Vinland was not his first sea crossing. After Erik had settled in Greenland, he frequently sailed to Iceland to trade, and Leif often accompanied his father on these trips. At his father’s side, Leif learned about ocean crossings and navigation. By all accounts, he had a natural aptitude for sailing and developed a reputation as an outstanding seafarer. Erik’s lessons and the time Leif spent sailing with his father undoubtedly honed the skills that enabled him to make the treacherous voyage across the Atlantic to the shores of Vinland.

But it was not just skills that Erik gave Leif; he also gave him the strength and determination that he needed to strike out on his own and go in search of a mysterious land that a man named Bjarni Herjolfsson claimed lay to the west of Greenland. Leif, like his father before him, had great courage and was prepared to gamble his life on finding a new territory that could be of value to himself and his family. He also clearly had an adventurous spirit and the desire to make his own mark on the world.

Erik also provided the physical starting point for Leif's voyage. Greenland was the launch pad for Leif's incredible voyage. Without the settlement of Greenland, Leif's epic voyage would not have been possible. Once the Vikings had settled in Greenland, it was only a matter of time before they reached the shores of North America. The shortest distance between Greenland and Canada is the Davis Strait and here the two landmasses are only separated by 250 nautical miles. For seafarers accustomed to making the 1,500 nautical mile crossing between Norway and Greenland, this relatively short distance would not have presented much of a challenge. Viking explorers were already used to living in freezing conditions and dealing with rough waters, frozen seas, ice floes, and the various other challenges of sailing in the open ocean, so they would naturally have attempted the Atlantic crossing.

If Leif had lived anywhere else in the world at the time, he probably never would have been the first European to visit North America, and for this reason, Erik the Red is integral to the story of the discovery of the continent. In fact, according to the sagas, Erik was originally supposed to sail with Leif when he went in search of the land that the Greenlanders had heard lay to the west. Legend has it that a short while before they were due to set sail, Erik fell off his horse and injured himself. But it was not his injuries that prevented him from joining the expedition but rather his superstitions. Erik saw the fall as a bad omen and decided not to accompany Leif. This might have been bad news for Erik, but it was perhaps not so bad for Leif. If Erik had been on the expedition and they had made it to the shores of North America, his name may well have been recorded in the sagas and history books as the first known European to have set foot on North American soil instead of Leif's. Erik the Red was obviously an ambitious man and as the chief of the Eastern Settlement would probably have taken credit for discovering Vinland. So, but for a simple twist of fate, Erik the Red may have gone down in history, not only as the man to establish the first European settlement on Greenland but also as the first European to set foot on the North American continent.

Chapter 8 – Erik’s Offspring and their voyages to Vinland

Erik was the patriarch of an adventurous and courageous clan. Even though he never made it to the shores of North America, he could probably be called the father of Vinland. It was not only through Leif that Erik influenced the discovery and exploration of Vinland but through all his children. At one time or another, each of Erik’s other children followed in Leif’s footsteps and attempted to make the Atlantic crossing. It appears that Erik passed his courage, lust for adventure, and pioneering spirit on to not only Leif, but also Thorvald, Thorstein, and even his daughter, Freydis. In fact, Freydis was known for her bravery and ruthlessness. Whether Erik’s children were driven by a desire to impress their father, emulate his success, or merely escape from his domineering presence, we will never know, but in their own way, each one attempted to make their mark on the Viking world.

According to the Saga of the Greenlanders, Thorvald, Thorstein, and Freydis were all part of different expeditions that attempted to reach Vinland, but not all were successful. Erik’s Saga, on the other hand, lumps all the expeditions into one. Interestingly Leif only ever made one voyage to Vinland, and after his initial discovery and exploration, he never returned to the North American continent. The buildings he built, however, remained and were used by subsequent Norse explorers, and there was even a brief, albeit unsuccessful, attempt to establish a more permanent settlement in Vinland.

The second of Erik’s sons to make the voyage to Vinland was his oldest child, Thorvald. He followed Leif’s directions and even used his longboat to make the voyage. Once he reached the shores of Vinland, he spent about two years exploring and sailing up and down the coast. He also harvested timber and grapes to take back to Greenland. Unfortunately for Thorvald and his crew, North America, unlike Greenland, was not uninhabited. The more time the Greenlanders spent on the North American continent, the more contact they had with the Native Americans called Skraelings by the Norsemen. Initially, they most likely traded with each other, but the more contact the groups had the more conflict developed, and inevitably skirmishes broke out between the Norsemen and the local tribes. During one of these skirmishes, Thorvald was shot by an arrow and died of his

wounds. He became the first European to die on the North American continent and his crew buried him at a place they named Crossness. Not long after Thorvald's death, his crew returned to Greenland with their cargo of timber and grapes

The second of Erik's children to attempt the voyage to Vinland was his youngest son, Thorstein. He tried to sail to Vinland to retrieve Thorvald's body and bring it back to Greenland, but unfortunately, his attempt was unsuccessful. Fierce storms and rough seas hampered the voyage, and Thorstein was forced to return to Greenland empty-handed.

Erik's daughter, Freydis led the last recorded expedition to Vinland. Freydis was by all accounts a formidable woman, who had inherited both her father's pioneering spirit and his violent ways. According to the Greenland Saga, Freydis persuaded two Icelandic traders and their crew to make the voyage to Vinland with her, and her crew of Greenlanders. Unfortunately, from the beginning, the voyage was fraught with disagreements, and eventually Freydis ordered her men to kill the Icelanders before she returned to Greenland with the usual cargo of timber and grapes. No explanation is given for her actions, and this is the last recorded expedition to Vinland during the Viking Age.

Chapter 9 – Decline of Vinland

For modern Americans, it may seem strange that the Greenlanders decided so quickly to abandon any attempts at a permanent settlement in Vinland. On the surface, the continent appeared to offer the Greenlanders everything they were looking for. It was certainly a far more hospitable environment than Greenland, the climate was moderate, grazing was plentiful, and the land was fertile. And, of course, there were large forests and plenty of wood for building homesteads and ships. So why didn't the Vikings settle in Vinland?

The main reason appears to be that it was just not economically viable. During the Viking Age, Vinland actually had very little to offer the Greenlanders in comparison to Europe. The resources available in Vinland, mostly grapes and timber, were not enough to make the treacherous voyage worthwhile. The distance between Greenland and Vinland was almost 3,500 km (2100 miles), and the same commodities were available in Norway whose voyage was shorter and far less dangerous. Europe was also a source of luxuries like spices from the East, salt, textiles, glass, and other commodities that the Greenlanders could not find in Vinland or produce for themselves.

Regular voyages between Greenland, Iceland, and Norway were also essential to ensure the political and cultural survival of the island. The settlers viewed themselves as Norse and followed their Norse traditions. With such strong ties to Norway, many would have retained their contacts and political connections in their old homeland. When they moved to the colonies, they were not looking to establish new independent homelands or break ties with Norway. If they had established a settlement in Vinland, it would have been a satellite colony and this was actually not really viable. Unfortunately, Vinland was just too far away to be an efficient and cost-effective Viking settlement.

The size of the colony on Greenland also made the settlement of Vinland impractical. The small and newly established colony of Greenland could not afford to send 30 or 40 of their most able-bodied men to Vinland for three or four years at a time. They needed those men to help establish and maintain farms and homesteads on the island. When Erik decided to leave Iceland and start a settlement on Greenland, there were many reasons for others to follow him. But at the time of Leif's voyage to Vinland, Greenland

was still a relatively new settlement and there were still plenty of resources for all the settlers.

Another disadvantage of colonizing Vinland was that, unlike Greenland, the North American continent was already inhabited by a large indigenous population. There was some trade between the Vikings and the local tribes, but there were also hostile encounters. The number of settlers was relatively small and they were always vulnerable to attack. A combination of all these factors meant that from the time of Leif's voyage to Vinland and the eventual abandonment of any kind of settlement on the North American continent was less than ten years.

The distance to Vinland and a hostile local population basically meant that once Leif and a number of other Greenlanders had been to Vinland, explored the area, and spent several winters there, they left and apparently never returned. Leif certainly never made the voyage again. He, like Erik, preferred to spend the rest of his life living in relative comfort at Brattahlid. After Erik's death, Leif became chief of the Eastern Settlement until his own death when the mantle passed to his son, Thorkel Leifson.

Even though there were no more attempts to settle on Vinland, the Old Icelandic records do mention that an Icelandic bishop, Eric Gnipsson, tried to make the voyage from Greenland to Vinland in 1121. It is not known what happened to the bishop and his name is never mentioned in any records again. Historians assume that his attempt was unsuccessful because three years later a new bishop named Arnald was sent to Greenland. In 1347 Icelandic records also mention a ship that arrived in Iceland loaded with timber from Markland. Apparently, the ship was on its way back to Greenland but was blown off course. This record indicates that even after the Greenlanders abandoned their settlement on Vinland, they may have continued to harvest timber from the North American continent.

Chapter 10 – Erik the Pagan and Christianity in Greenland

The first settlers in Greenland, including Erik and his family, were predominantly pagans who worshiped the Old Norse gods. At the time that Erik and his followers left for Greenland, Christianity was spreading across Europe, but Iceland was still pagan, and the Greenlanders took their beliefs with them.

During the Viking Age, Christianity was already the dominant religion in Europe, but it was slow to be adopted by the Scandinavian countries. Christian priests and monks were sent to Scandinavia to try and convert the Vikings, but the Norse loved their old gods and were slow to let go of their pagan traditions and superstitions. The successful conversion took centuries, but by the end of the Viking Age, most Vikings had converted to Christianity and were baptized and buried in the faith.

When the Vikings finally converted to Christianity, it occurred, for the most part, without violence and bloodshed. One of the factors that made the Vikings adopt Christianity was not because of religious beliefs but rather for practical reasons. Viking traders were beginning to suffer losses because Christian traders and countries began to discriminate against Muslims and pagans. To solve this problem and continue trading in Europe, many Vikings traders merely adopted the signs of Christianity outwardly to protect their business interests. They would wear a cross when trading with Christians but replaced it with Thor's hammer when they returned to their homes.

In Norway, Christianity only became the dominant religion around 995 when Olaf Trygvason became king. Little is known about the early life of Olaf Trygvason. During his youth, he became a mighty Viking warrior who acquired great wealth and fame by raiding and plundering throughout Europe. He campaigned in Britain around 994 AD and it is believed that this is where he was converted to Christianity. When he returned to Norway in 996, he was proclaimed king by the Althing.

Olaf was the first Christian king of Norway and he set about converting the predominantly pagan population to Christianity in a brutal manner. Pagan temples were destroyed and churches were built in their place. Those who refused to convert were killed, tortured, maimed, or banished. After bringing Christianity to Norway, King Olaf was determined to spread his

religion to the outlying areas of Iceland and Greenland. King Olaf may have succeeded in converting Norway by force, but Greenland was beyond his control, so there he could not wield the sword as effectively to convince the settlers to convert. He needed to use other techniques.

In Iceland, Christianity was adopted at the Althing in the year 1000. King Olaf sent missionaries to Iceland in the late 990's but they met with limited success. King Olaf then tried a more aggressive approach. He cut off trade between Iceland and Norway and he threatened to kill Icelanders living in Norway. King Olaf's actions led to growing tensions between pagans and Christians in Iceland. To prevent a civil war, the adoption of Christianity was put to a vote at an Althing.

By the time the Icelanders adopted Christianity, the Greenlanders had already left the island. Conversion in Greenland was a more gradual and voluntary process and the Althing never mandated it. One of the reasons for this may have been that Erik the Red never embraced Christianity and remained a committed pagan until he died.

This might have been a problem for King Olaf, but an opportunity presented itself when Leif Erikson visited Norway around 997 AD when he was approximately 24 years old. It was not unusual at the time for young Norsemen to serve as retainers in the royal household and the Greenlanders were still very much tied to their Norwegian homeland. This visit was an opportunity for Leif to make political connections and form alliances that would place him in good standing in the future. Before Leif made his voyage to Norway, he, like the rest of his family and most of the other settlers, worshiped pagan gods.

When Leif arrived in Norway, he was welcomed into the court of King Olaf, who knew his father. It appears that the king took quite a shine to the young Greenlander, as Leif was invited to spend the winter in the king's court. The time Leif spent with King Olaf was to have a lasting influence, not only on Leif but also on the settlement of Greenland and the relationship between Leif and Erik. It was during his visit to Norway that Leif converted to Christianity, and when he returned to Greenland, he took his new religion with him.

This was perfect for King Olaf because the only way that he was going to spread Christianity to the distant shores of Greenland was through converts with influence in the settlements. In Leif, he found just such a person—a

young man who was held in high esteem in Greenland and who was able to influence and convert the Greenlanders to the Christian faith. Before Leif and his crew returned to Greenland, they all converted and were baptized. King Olaf then gave Leif the task of spreading the faith to Greenland. According to Erik's Saga, he even sent a priest back to Greenland with Leif. Leif clearly took his mission from the Norwegian monarch very seriously, and on his return to the island, he set about converting the Greenlanders to Christianity. Like his father, Leif obviously had the ear of the people and knew how to persuade them to his way of thinking. Using his influence and reputation as a man of fair judgment and honesty, Leif was able to convert many Greenlanders. Even his mother, Thjodhild, who had been a life-long pagan, converted. In fact, she became so passionate about her new religion that she commissioned the first church ever built in Greenland. This led to some conflict within the family as Erik at first refused to build the church. According to legend, however, he gave in to his wife's demands when she refused to have sex with him until he built her a church.

In 1932, a group of Danish archaeologists excavating Brattahlid (Erik the Red's homestead) found the remains of what they assume is Thjodhild's church. The church could hold between 20 and 30 worshipers and was located close to a communal hall, where people could meet and play board games, and it was surrounded by a wall to keep out farm animals. Later, in 1961, a small horseshoe-shaped chapel was also found on the site as well as the skeletal remains of 144 people. The most interesting skeletons were three that were buried close to the church wall and are believed to be the remains of Erik the Red, Thjodhild and Leif Erikson. Erik may not have been a Christian, but it appears that his remains were ultimately laid to rest by his family in a Christian graveyard. This, however, does not mean that we can assume he had a Christian burial. As a life-long pagan, Erik is far more likely to have had a Viking send-off.

Leif may have found it easy to convert his mother and many of the other Greenlanders, but Erik was an entirely different matter. Father and son may have shared the same adventurous spirit, determination, and leadership skills, but they didn't always see eye to eye on all things, and in the end, they didn't share the same religious views. Erik was a bold and brave man who believed strongly in his gods and deities. He clung to his old Norse superstitions and continued to worship his pagan gods. These were, after all, the gods who had protected him for years. They had allowed him to

survive raids and battles and sanctioned his expeditions of exploration. They had guided him to Greenland and enabled him to establish a successful settlement there and prosper. Erik the Red would have believed that his pagan gods had clearly favored him and allowed him to become successful, and he was not about to abandon them for a new, and in his mind, untested god.

Norse paganism is not a monotheistic religion. In Norse mythology, there are various spiritual beings, including gods, goddesses, giants, elves, dwarves, spirits, and other powerful creatures that influence the lives of men. There are various worlds in which all these different beings dwell. Asgard is the home of the gods and is a large fortified castle that floats in the air. The gods and goddesses most venerated by the Vikings are Odin, Thor, Loki, Baldur, Frigg, Freya, Freyr, and Njoror. Odin is the ruler of the deities, a powerful war god and seeker of wisdom. He is also the father of Thor who, with his magic hammer, Mjolnir, protect mankind and the realm of Midgard where humans live. Thor is also worshiped as the god of warriors, and Vikings like Erik would have tried to emulate his courage in battle. Then there is Loki, a dangerous and mischievous half-god, half-giant who wreaks havoc among the gods.

The giants live in Jotunheim at the edge of the world and caused chaos and destruction. They are related to the gods but are also their enemies. In Norse legend, Thor hunts giants in order to protect mankind. Besides the gods who live in the air and the giants who live in the world, there are the dwarves who live underground in Svartalfheim. They are the miners and smiths of the mythological world, but they are not short humans, as people tend to imagine, but rather powerful, invisible spiritual beings. The Norsemen also believed in elves, who were demi-gods and land spirits who inhabited everything on land. These land spirits had considerable power over the land and all those who live on it.

Erik the Red would have believed and worshiped in all these Norse gods and deities. One of the gods that he would have wanted to appease and keep on his side was Aegir. As the commander of the sea, Aegir was loved and feared in equal measure by the seafaring Vikings. According to Norse legends, Aegir and his wife, Ran, dwell in a magnificent feast hall beneath the ocean, and Ran is often depicted as drowning unfortunate sailors. When a Norse ship sank, it was believed that the dead sailors would forever dine in Aegir's Hall.

Like most Norse pagans, Erik believed that every person's fate was predetermined by the Norns, female deities who ruled the destinies of both gods and men. He would have thought that it was heroic to die in battle and this would have given him courage on the battlefield. But Erik would not have believed in the modern, simplistic view of the Viking afterlife where all warriors who died in battle would reside in Valhalla, the Hall of the Fallen and realm of the god Odin, for eternity. According to Erik's pagan beliefs, there was more than one Land of the Dead.

Norse mythology is, however, not clear on how a person would end up in one Land of the Dead or another. Warriors were indeed selected to join Odin in Valhalla, where they spent all day fighting one another and committing deeds of great valor. Then at night they would feast and drink. Odin gathered these brave warriors around him, not merely as a reward for their bravery but so that they could fight alongside him at Ragnarok, a battle during which Odin and his warriors were doomed to die. It was, however, not exclusively those who died in battle, but any great warrior or leader who would be useful to Odin during Ragnarok, who might be chosen to reside in Valhalla. Erik may well have believed that he would ultimately fight, feast and drink in Odin's realm until Ragnarok.

Erik would have known that Valhalla was not the only Land of the Dead, and a Viking did not have to die in battle to enjoy a glorious afterlife. The goddess Freya also welcomed the dead to her hall, known as Folkvang, the Field of the People, but very little information exists about Folkvang or who was chosen to reside there. And of course Vikings who died at sea might well find themselves as guests in the underwater world of Aegir and Ran. The most common Land of the Dead, however, was Hel; an underground world presided over by a goddess of the same name. This was not a place of eternal damnation or torment, like the Christian concept of Hell, but rather a continuation of life in a new place. There, the Vikings believed, one would eat, drink, fight, and do all the things that they had done while they were alive.

The Vikings had no churches, temples or religious hierarchy. They honored their gods in many ways and used symbols to represent their gods and their beliefs. Some of these symbols can be found carved on rune stones, swords, axes, and other items that have survived from the Viking Age. One such powerful symbol that was displayed by many Vikings was Thor's hammer, Mjolnir. Carvings of Mjolnir can be found on weapons, boats, and Viking

jewelry. Many Viking warriors wore a metal medallion of Thor's hammer as a necklace, in the same way, that a Christian would wear a cross.

Erik's pagan beliefs and superstitions were central to his life, and he was not prepared to give them up just because his son returned from Norway with a new faith. Erik most likely believed that his faith in the Norse gods had got him that far in life and they would continue to protect him.

Chapter 11 – The Decline of the Greenland Colony

The founding of the colony in Greenland was probably Erik the Red's greatest contribution to world history and his most enduring legacy. It certainly earned him his place in the Old Icelandic sagas and in the modern history books, but unfortunately, Erik's colony was not able to survive for as long as his story has endured. For half a century, there was a colony of Norse families who lived in Greenland, and at the height of its existence, the Viking population numbered between 3,000 and 5,000 inhabitants living on 300 to 400 farms. Even though these people always considered themselves Norse and retained strong ties with Norway and Iceland, they were for all intents and purposes Greenlanders. For many, this was the only land they ever knew. It is where they were born, raised, married, had families, and eventually died. Many made successful lives for themselves in this icy and often harsh environment, becoming very wealthy and influential. Greenland was more than a mere outpost; it was a well-established settlement where the majority of Greenlanders spent their entire lives and for the most part, we assume, were happy.

But unfortunately, the Norse population of Greenland did not survive into the modern age. The land that Erik the Red and his followers struggled so hard to tame could sadly not support their descendants forever. Eventually, life on Greenland became too hard for those living in this harsh environment. Approximately 500 years after Erik had explored Greenland and decided to make it his home, both the Eastern and Western Settlements had been abandoned. Theories and speculation abound as to why life on the island became unsustainable, forcing the Norse to eventually abandon it, but the exact reasons remain unknown. Perhaps one day through historical research and archeological finds, the answers may reveal themselves, but the island has yet to give up all its secrets. What is known is that sometime between the 15th and 17th centuries the entire Norse population of Greenland vanished.

Most historians agree that it is unlikely that one single catastrophic event destroyed the settlement. It is far more likely that a combination of factors led to the demise of both Viking settlements and eventually forced the Greenlanders to abandon their lifelong homes and move to other more hospitable and sustainable regions. The Little Ice Age, a period during

which Europe and North America experienced unnaturally cold, harsh winters, could have contributed to the decline of the settlement. As a result of these harsh conditions, crops would have failed and this would have been followed by widespread famine throughout the region. Everyday life would have been extremely hard, and farming on Greenland would have become borderline. But this alone would not have driven the Greenlanders from their homeland. They would still have been able to survive by shifting their focus from farming to seal hunting, fur trading, and fishing.

One can speculate that the Greenlanders were farmers at heart, who hunted and fished to supplement their income, and that they continued to try and farm for as long as possible. As grazing on the island became sparse, there is archeological evidence that they shifted their focus from large cattle to smaller livestock such as sheep and goats.

Changing fashions in Europe may also have contributed to the decline of the settlement. As tastes on the European continent changed, there would have been less demand for the natural resources that the Greenlanders had access to. Their biggest exports for centuries were walrus tusks, seal pelts, and unicorn horns, and as these declined in popularity, so did the economy of the island.

The decline of the settlement took place around the same time as Christopher Columbus sailed to the Americas, so it is possible the world was just changing. With new territories to explore and trade opportunities opening up in the west, Europeans probably no longer had a use for Greenland. The cold, icy landmass to the north no longer held any fascination for Europeans as they now turned their attention to the Americas and everything that the vast, unexplored continent had to offer.

Growing isolation would also have contributed to the decline and eventual demise of the Norse settlement. Ship traffic between Iceland and Norway was becoming more sporadic. Shipbuilding may have improved in the half a century since Erik the Red founded Greenland, but the sea remained treacherous, especially so far north. Icebergs and giant waves were a constant danger in the frigid waters and, with the dwindling demand for resources and products from Greenland, fewer traders were willing to make the long and arduous voyage. In the same way that it had not been worth the Greenlanders' efforts to travel regularly to Vinland for resources, it was no longer economically viable for traders to make the voyage to Greenland. As

a result, not only was it more difficult for the Greenlanders to sell their produce, supplies to the colony became more sporadic and expensive.

Increasing isolation also meant that the Greenlanders were losing touch with their national identity and Norse heritage. Without regular trade and travel to Norway, the Greenlanders were becoming more and more isolated from their homeland and culture, and this would have impacted the mental health of the colony. They may have suffered from depression and lacked the motivation to keep the colony moving forward. Europe was moving forward, the world was changing, and Greenland was being left behind. The colony no longer offered many opportunities for the younger generations. There was no more arable land available for younger son's and due to the change in climate the land that was available was becoming more marginal for farming, and there was less grazing for livestock. Strong, able-bodied Greenlanders of child-bearing age would have been the first to abandon life on the island. They would have left their childhood homes and families to seek opportunities elsewhere. In the same way that Erik and his followers came to Greenland looking for a better life, the more adventurous Greenlanders were later forced to leave the island to make a better life for themselves. Erik the Red would probably have been sad to see his descendants dispersed and his colony abandoned, but he would surely have admired the tenacity and spirit of the Greenlanders who, like him, were not afraid to leave their homeland and build new lives elsewhere.

The abandonment of Greenland appears to have taken place in an orderly manner. This also suggests that the colony declined slowly due to various factors rather than being abandoned suddenly as a result of one cataclysmic event. Excavations on the island have turned up very few valuables and archeologists believe this indicates that the settlers left slowly in an orderly fashion and took everything of value with them. Besides not knowing why the Greenlanders left, there are also no records of where they went. For the most part, they were most likely assimilated back into Norwegian society. Having kept close ties with Norway for most of the time that the colony existed and because there were no indigenous people on Greenland to influence the Norse culture, the Greenlanders would have retained their Norse identity and could still relate to the Norwegian way of life. This would have made it possible for them to return to Norway and easily adapt to this environment.

After the end of the Greenland settlement, Erik's family fades into obscurity. This is mostly due to the lack of any surviving historical records from the Greenland settlement. Perhaps, if the settlement had survived to modern times, there would be information about Erik's descendants. If there are any living descendants of Erik the Red and the rest of the Greenlander's, they are most likely to be found in modern-day Scandinavia, Iceland and perhaps even North America.

Chapter 12 – Modern Greenland

Half a century after Erik the Red colonized Greenland, the Vikings abandoned their settlements and most likely returned to Iceland, Norway, and the other Scandinavian countries, but that did not mean that Greenland became uninhabited. The island has been inhabited on and off for at least 4,500 years. The ancestors of the Inuit, who are the majority of modern residents, began migrating from the Canadian mainland to Greenland in the 13th century. Like the Vikings, the modern-day inhabitants of Greenland live mostly on the western side of the island. The island currently has a population of approximately 56,500 people and is the world's least densely populated territory. About one-third of the population lives in the capital city of Nuuk, close to where the Viking Western Settlement was during their time on the island.

One of Erik the Red's greatest and most enduring legacies is the Scandinavian influence that has endured in Greenland to this day. The Vikings may have long since left the island, but their footprint has remained. Although Greenland is technically part of the North American continent, it has always been under European influence and control. Greenland came under the control of the Norwegian crown in 1262, and their rule lasted until the Norse abandoned their settlements sometime between the 15th and 17th centuries. In the 18th century, Scandinavian explorers returned to Greenland, and in 1814 it became a Danish colony. In 1953, Greenland was made part of the Danish Realm under the constitution of Denmark. In 1979, Greenland was granted home rule by Denmark, and in 2008, Greenland voted in favor of the Self-Government Act that gave them greater autonomy from Denmark. In accordance with the Self-Government Act, Greenland would take greater responsibility for its own coast guard, police force and law courts. There would be a more definite split of future oil revenue, subsidies from Copenhagen would be phased out and Greenlandic would be the sole official language of the island. Today, Greenland is a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy under the rule of the sovereign of Denmark. Erik the Red's descendants may no longer rule Greenland or own large tracts of land on the island, but he is not forgotten and the role that he played in the history of Greenland is still recognized today. The ruins of Brattahlid, near the modern town of Qassiarsuk, attract tourists to the island, and the remains of buildings that

Erik built, including the church, are clearly visible. Viking buildings have also been reconstructed on the island in order to give visitors an insight into how the Norsemen lived on Greenland.

Conclusion – Erik’s Legacy

Erik’s colony in Greenland may not have ultimately survived, but the relatively brief time that the Norsemen spent in this harsh and inhospitable land played a vital role in the Viking Age of exploration and expansion. It extended Scandinavian influence and control over the icy northern regions and provided Europe with exotic items such as walrus tusks and unicorn horns. Closer to home, it increased Erik the Red’s wealth and power and enabled him and his family to live like jarls in the new colony he helped build. It also ensured Erik’s place in history.

But Erik’s legacy was not just the founding of the first European settlement on Greenland; it was also his family. Erik was the patriarch of an adventurous and courageous clan, and all his children inherited his determination and indomitable spirit. If it had not been for Erik the Red and his pioneering ways, even the history of America would have been different. Erik may never have set foot on Vinland but his influence on the continent can be felt through his children. Without Erik’s colony on Greenland, Leif Erikson may never have made his epic voyage to Vinland, and Christopher Columbus might well have had the honor of being the first European to set foot on North American soil. Erik not only provided Leif with the base from which to launch his voyage; he also gave him the skills and tools to become one of the world’s most renowned explorers.

Once Erik settled on Greenland and became chief of the Eastern Settlement, he appeared to have put an end to his violent ways and there is no record of him committing any more crimes or murders. He appears to have settled into the life of a successful Viking farmer and trader, becoming wealthy and powerful. He made numerous voyages to Iceland and even Norway, but he never made any more voyages of discovery. Records indicate that he died around 1002 during an epidemic that a group of settlers brought to the island. It is unclear whether Leif Erikson was still in Vinland when his father died, but we know that Leif returned to Greenland and became chief of the Eastern Settlement after Erik’s death. He also then settled down and made no more epic voyages, not even returning to Vinland. When Leif died about 20 years after his father, his son, Thorkel Leifson, became the next chief.

Greenland may seem like a cold and harsh land to many people but to Erik the Red and his family, it was home. It gave them wealth, fame, power, and

a lasting place in history. Today Erik the Red is remembered and celebrated, not only as the founder of Greenland but also as a mighty Viking warrior, brave explorer and leader of men.

Timeline of Erik the Red's life

The exact dates of the major milestones in Erik the Red's life are not recorded, but a timeline can be drawn up that approximates the most important dates.

Between 950 and 960 AD - Erik Thorvaldsson, better known by his nickname Erik the Red, is born in Rogaland on the southwestern coast of Norway. He is the son of Thorvald Asvaldsson.

Circa 960 - Thorvald Asvaldsson commits murder and is banished from Norway. He takes his family to Iceland and settles in Hornstrandir.

Circa 970 - Erik the Red's second son, Leif Erikson, is born in Iceland. He also has two other sons and a daughter before he left Iceland.

Circa 980 - Erik fights with his neighbors and is convicted of killing Eyiolf the Foul. He is banished from Haukadal and moves further north to Oxney with his family.

Circa 982 - Erik is again found guilty of killing his fellow Norsemen and is banned from Iceland for three years.

982 to 985 - Erik and his crew explore Greenland.

Circa 985 - Erik returns to Iceland.

Summer 986 - Erik the Red sets sail with 25 ships and approximately 300 followers to establish a settlement on Greenland. Only 14 ships survive the voyage. The Vikings form two settlements in Greenland, and Erik is elected paramount chief of the Eastern Settlement. He establishes a farm named Brattahlid.

Circa 999 – Erik's son, Leif Erikson sails to Norway. On the way, he stops at the Hebrides where he fathers a son, Thorgils, with Thorgunna, the daughter of a local chief. In Norway, Leif Erikson spends the winter in the household of King Olaf Tryggvason and is converted to Christianity.

Circa 1000 –Leif Erikson returns to Greenland, but soon afterward, he takes a small group of Vikings and sets sail on a voyage of discovery to the North American continent. Leif and his crew establish a small settlement in an area that he calls Vinland and which historians believe could be modern-day Newfoundland. Erik the Red almost accompanies Leif on this historic voyage, but he falls off his horse shortly before the expedition is due to leave Greenland. Seeing this as a bad omen, he decides to remain behind in Greenland.

Circa 1002 – Erik the Red dies in Greenland during an epidemic.

Circa 1003 – Leif leaves the settlement at Vinland and returns to his father's estate at Brattahild in Greenland. He becomes chief of the Eastern Settlement and never returns to Vinland.

Between 1004 and 1010 – The Greenlanders make more voyages to Vinland. Erik the Red's son, Thorvald, is killed by the local inhabitants in North America and is the first European to die on the continent.

Circa 1010 – The settlement at Vinland declines and fails mainly due to attacks from indigenous tribes and unsustainability.

Circa 1025 – Erik's son, Leif Erikson, dies and his grandson, Thorkel Leifson, becomes chief of the Eastern Settlement

Between the 15th and 17th Century – The Norse settlements in Greenland decline and are eventually abandoned.

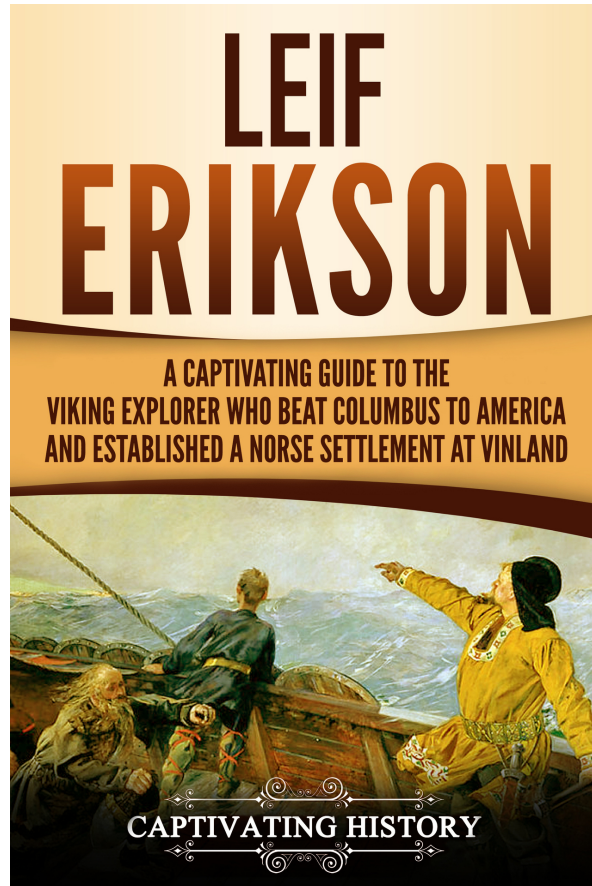
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Part 3: Leif Erikson

*A Captivating Guide to the Viking Explorer Who
Beat Columbus to America and Established a Norse
Settlement at Vinland*



Introduction

The formidable sight of giant, blond, sword-wielding Norsemen sailing up river in their dragon boats to attack, raid, and pillage was enough to strike fear into the heart of any European community or settlement. The Vikings were a fearsome nation, conquering all who lay before them as they expanded their influence and power throughout Europe and destroying those who tried to halt their expansion across the continent. These terrifying Viking warriors were feared throughout Europe for their brutal and ruthless attacks, but they were so much more than fearsome warriors.

The Vikings were also exceptional boat builders, seafarers, adventures, and explorers. They not only raided and attacked settlements across Europe and Britain, but they also sailed far and wide, discovering and colonizing new lands. Their impact on history is far-reaching and the mark that they made on the world, especially during the Viking Age, can still be seen today.

The Viking Age was a time of expansion, conquest, and exploration and as a result, Norse culture and ancestry are found throughout Europe and the world. During this time the Vikings were sailing far and wide, discovering new lands and settling new territories. They were not afraid to take on their enemies or harsh climates to expand their territory and influence. This was the culture that famous Norse explorer Leif Erikson was born into. This was the world that shaped him and made him into an adventurous man who was not afraid to sail into the unknown to discover new lands. It was this background and heritage that enabled Leif Erikson to cross the Atlantic on an open longboat and become the first known European to have set foot on the North American continent, almost half a millennium before Christopher Columbus.

Chapter 1 – The Making of the Man, Leif Erikson's Formative Years

Over the centuries, much has been written about Leif Erikson and his remarkable voyage across the Atlantic, but unfortunately, no historical records exist from his lifetime, and most accounts of the discovery of Vinland are based on two Icelandic sagas written centuries later. His story has been embellished, diminished, and altered depending on the motivations of the writer. As a result, the man, the myth, and the legend have become inseparable, making it difficult to establish where the facts end and the fiction begins. But even if one cannot entirely separate fact from fiction, there is no denying that Leif Erikson made a significant impact on the world. This incredible Norse explorer not only changed the face of his world by discovering and exploring new territories, he also changed the land he lived in by converting the Greenlanders to Christianity.

No great events in history happen in isolation, and to understand Leif Erikson and his discovery of the North American continent, one needs to understand the world he grew up in. To do this effectively, it is necessary to take a closer look at what was happening in and around Europe during Leif's formative years. Leif Erikson was, without a doubt, a product of his time and upbringing. The legacy of his ancestry would have had a profound effect on the development of his character. His family, environment, culture, and the events taking place around him in his formative years would all have shaped the man he was to become.

We've all heard stories of mighty Viking warriors sailing their longboats far and wide to conquer new territories. Children around the world grow up being told about these formidable Norsemen who were famous for plundering, raiding, and looting settlements across Europe and Britain. We know the legends of Odin, the god of war, and his even more famous son, Thor, the god of thunder, and his mighty war hammer, Mjolnir. But the impact of the Vikings on world history goes far deeper than legends, war, and destruction.

The Viking Age (approximately 793-1066 AD) was not an age of war and destruction; it was an age of exploration, colonization, and settlement. It was a time when young, courageous Norsemen from across Scandinavia ventured forth from their homelands to make their mark on the world. During this time, Scandinavians could be found throughout most of the

known world, from the Middle East to the distant shores of North America. Still today, the Norse legacy is seen throughout Europe.

The Swedes predominantly went east to Russia and the surrounding areas, while the Danes explored the North Sea coastline, England, and France. But it is the Norwegian voyages that are central to Leif Erikson's story. Some Norwegians went south like the Danes, but mostly they crossed the North Sea to conquer and rule Britain or sailed west across the Norwegian Sea and northern stretches of the Atlantic Ocean. The Norsemen plundered and pillaged their way through Shetland, Orkney, the Hebrides, Scotland, Ireland, and the Faroe Islands as they ventured further and further from Norway until, toward the end of the ninth century, they reached the cold and distant shores of Iceland.

The first Vikings arrived on the shores of Iceland in approximately 860 as part of an exploratory party, and they did not settle there at the time. The island was named Iceland by Floki Vilgeroarson who was disappointed by the harshness of the environment. But despite this unfavorable first impression, the settlement of Iceland went ahead and the first Vikings settlers arrived sometime around 870. More than half the initial wave of settlers appear to have come from around Bergen in Norway.

There is much speculation as to why these intrepid Norsemen left their homelands to seek greener pastures elsewhere. The reasons appear to be as many and varied as the men who made the voyages. Dreams of glory in battle, wealth, trade, and political ambition would all have been compelling reasons for a Viking to cross the often treacherous and icy North Sea to conquer existing settlements and colonize new territories. These new areas may have offered more resources, land, and freedom to adventurous Vikings. In the new settlements and outlying territories, there would also have been fewer laws and social constraints. But it was not only pull factors that drove the Viking Age of expansion, as there were also push factors. Overpopulation and tyrannical rule were common in Scandinavia at the time and would have driven many Scandinavians to seek new and better lives elsewhere.

While the Vikings had a reputation as fearsome warriors, most of the men and women living in Scandinavia during this time were farmers, craftsmen, or slaves, and their lives consisted of hard physical labor in a demanding and often brutal environment. They were just as vulnerable to raids as the settlements they attacked and as susceptible to malnutrition, famine, and

disease as anyone else at the time. These were all factors that made the allure of a fresh start in a new land worth the risk to many Norse families and as a result, voyages of discovery and exploration were often followed by voyages of immigration and settlement. Of course, there was also the appeal of the honor and prestige that went with discovering and settling new territories. And then there were the men who were banished or outlawed from their homeland for criminal behavior and who were forced to find new places to settle.

One such immigrant and outlaw was Thorvald Asvaldsson, Leif Erikson's grandfather. He was banished from Norway and forced to find a new place to live after being found guilty of manslaughter. Fortunately for Thorvald Asvaldsson and his family, including his young son, Erik Thorvaldsson, there were plenty of other places to go. The family left Norway and settled in Hornstrandir in the newly colonized northwestern part of Iceland.

Erik Thorvaldsson, commonly known as Erik the Red, was born in Norway and was approximately ten years old when the family moved to Iceland. The immigration of this family to Iceland is central to the story of Leif Erikson because he is the son of Erik Thorvaldsson. Leif was born in Iceland in 970 and his formative years – like those of any Norse child in this unforgiving land – were hard. In a time when 30 to 40 percent of children didn't reach adulthood due to disease, attacks, and malnutrition, Leif's chances of survival would have been little better than any other Viking child. But fortunately for history, Erikson did survive and thrive in the harsh environment that he was born into.

To better understand Leif Erikson and the traits that he developed during childhood and later used to his advantage when he left his home in search of a mysterious land to the west of Greenland, one has to take a closer look at his family dynamic and the role of his father. Not only in the family but also in the settlement of Greenland. Erik's discovery and settlement of Greenland and Leif's later discovery of Vinland on the North American continent are intrinsically linked. Leif may well have been the man who discovered Vinland but one cannot separate his story from that of Erik the Red and the settlement of Greenland. As his father, Erik would have had an immense influence, both good and bad, over Leif and the man he was to become. Erik may have taught Leif to be a farmer, warrior, and seafarer but Leif also appears to have inherited his father's determination, courage, and adventurous spirit.

Growing up in the Viking Age as Erik the Red's son would have had a profound impact on Leif's character. By all accounts, Erik the Red was a formidable figure. He was a large man with his flaming red hair and beard, and he most likely had a temper to match. He would have been a fearsome sight at the head of a Viking raiding party, striking fear into the hearts of any coastal settlement. But Erik the Red's contribution to world history is not as a Viking warrior but rather as an explorer and the man famous for the discovery and settlement of Greenland.

The settlement of Greenland is a pivotal point in Leif Erikson's life story. Once the Vikings had settled in Greenland, it was only a matter of time before they made their way to the North American continent. The Davis Strait between Greenland and North American is only 250 nautical miles at its narrowest point and crossing this distance would not have posed much of a challenge for seafarers who were accustomed to the 1,500 nautical mile Norwegian Sea crossing from Norway to Greenland. The Vikings were accustomed to dealing with frozen seas and ice flows, and the dangers of the crossing would not have put them off. When one looks at the Viking Age as an age of exploration and colonization, it is almost inevitable that a Greenlander would eventually form a settlement in North American. It is probably also safe to assume that if it had not been Leif Erikson, it would have been another Greenlander.

Chapter 2 – The Settlement of Greenland

According to the medieval Icelandic sagas, Erik the Red was born in Rogaland in Norway and grew up in Hornstrandir on the newly colonized Iceland. He married Thjodhild, and they moved from Hornstrandir to Haukadel where Erik built a farm called Eiriksstadir (he might have received the land as part of his wife's dowry) and started a family. Erik and Thjodhild had four surviving children, three sons, Thorvald, Leif, and Thorstein and a daughter, Freydis. But Erik had a fiery temperament, and he did not always get on well with his neighbors, arguing with them often. During one such argument, his temper got the better of him and he killed a man named Eyiolf the Foul.

The Vikings may have been ruthless warriors who raided and pillaged settlements across Europe, but within their own society the rules of law were strictly applied.¹ When Erik the Red killed Eyiolf the Foul in 982, the wheels of Viking justice were set in motion and this led to Erik standing trial, being found guilty of murder, and outlawed from Iceland and Norway by the Thorsnes Thing for three years. Banishment was a serious punishment for any Viking, and Erik was forced to leave Iceland and his family or face being killed by another Viking. But this is the perfect example of turning adversity into opportunity.

During his banishment, Erik the Red sailed west across the Atlantic until he happened upon Greenland, and then he spent the rest of his banishment exploring this new territory. What Erik initially found was a land that was mostly covered with glaciers and ice fields and was considerably colder than Iceland. But when he sailed up the western coast, he reached a part of the island that was free of ice and similar to Iceland. According to the Saga of Erik the Red, he spent the first winter on Eiriksey, the second winter in Eiriksholmar, and he explored as far north as Snaefell and Hrafnfjard. The island may have been cold and harsh, with no great forests, but there was plenty of sea life off the coast, pastures for cattle, and adequate wildlife on the island to sustain a settlement. Off the coast of Greenland, the Vikings could hunt walruses, seals, and whales and on land they could hunt foxes, bears, and caribou. This enabled them to make a living as traders and buy much-needed resources, such as timber for homesteads and shipbuilding, from Norway.

While Erik sailed off into the unknown and explored Greenland, Leif remained on Iceland with the rest of the family. He would have helped around the homestead, worked with the livestock, and planted and harvested crops while his mother took care of the family. The young Leif would also have learned how to hunt and fish and develop other skills that he needed to survive in a harsh and inhospitable environment. Fortunately, because of their position in society,² the family would have had thralls to help work the farm while Erik was outlawed. One man who had a great influence on Leif's young life, especially during the time his father was outlawed, was a man named Thyrker. Thyrker was a German who Erik the Red had captured and brought back to Iceland, but he does not appear to have been a slave. By all accounts, Thyrker was a good teacher, and he taught Leif everything he needed to know about weapons and battle tactics, but he also taught him how to read and trade. Even after Erik the Red had returned to Iceland, Thyrker continued to play an important role in Leif's life, and he accompanied Leif on his voyage to North America.

Erik was only partially outlawed, and this meant that he was allowed to keep his land and possessions and return to his family after three years. Erik did return to his family, but by then he had no intention of staying on Iceland, as he had seen the potential to start a new settlement on Greenland. The land may have been colder, less hospitable, and with larger glaciers than Iceland, but Erik managed to persuade a number of Icelandic Vikings that there was enough land to farm, there were pastures suitable for raising livestock, and the fjords were teeming with cod and other fish.

In the summer of 985, Erik the Red and his followers set sail for Greenland. This was no small undertaking. There were twenty-five ships, approximately 300 settlers, horses, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and various equipment. Making the journey from Iceland to Greenland was a treacherous and risky venture, and of the twenty-five ships that set sail from Iceland, only fourteen made it safely to Greenland. The rest either turned back or were lost at sea. During this voyage, and subsequent voyages that he made with his father between Greenland and Iceland, the young Leif would have learned valuable lessons about ocean crossings and deep-sea navigation. It was this knowledge that would have enabled him to make the crossing from Greenland to North America.

Making it from Iceland to Greenland was merely the beginning for the settlers, and once they landed on Greenland things did not get any easier.

Every day was a constant struggle for survival. Homesteads had to be built, crops planted, the livestock needed grazing and shelter, and the men had to hunt and fish to feed their families. But Erik was a competent man, and under his leadership, the settlement flourished and grew as more immigrants braved the treacherous voyage from Iceland. Establishing a new settlement in an unknown and hostile land was a daunting venture and having the courage to attempt it and the determination to succeed gives one a clear indication of the type of people the Greenlanders were.

Erik the Red may be credited with discovering Greenland and starting the first settlement on the island, but he did not single-handedly settle Greenland. This was a joint effort that involved all the settlers and relied on everyone pulling their weight. By the time the first settlers arrived in Greenland, Leif was old enough to do his share of the work, and he would have toiled alongside the men to build homesteads for the families and shelter for the livestock. He would have experienced firsthand what it took to settle a harsh and inhospitable land.

This early introduction to settling a previously uninhabited territory and the knowledge he gained working alongside his father would undoubtedly have stood Leif in good stead when he later landed on the shores of North America. He would have known how to choose a suitable site for settlement and what tasks needed to be completed in order to establish a base camp in a new territory.

His early life on Greenland would have given him the confidence, skills, and knowledge he required to strike out on his own. By all accounts, Erik the Red sailed frequently between Iceland and Greenland to trade, and Leif made many trips with his father. Erik taught his son about ocean crossings and navigation and apparently, Leif had a natural aptitude for sailing and developed a reputation as a seafarer. One legend tells how Leif, when he was about sixteen years old, spotted a polar bear on an ice flow and decided to hunt the bear. He used his knowledge of the sea and currents to take his boat upstream from the bear and let the current carry him into the ice flow, and then he used the same method to get back to land. Apparently, the people watching from the shore were impressed by this tactic. There is no way of verifying the truth behind this story, but if it is true, then it is a good demonstration of Leif's understanding of the sea and its currents and his natural talent as a sailor. It also demonstrates his bravery and ability as a hunter. Clearly, Leif was not afraid to take risks to achieve his goals.

¹ Viking law was well established and was the root of their government. The Vikings did not have a central government but the rule of law, fairness, and justice was important to them. They lived in an ordered and structured society made up of small clans and each clan had a chief. Decisions regarding village life were made at a "Thing." The Thing can be compared to a legislative assembly. The chief of the settlement ran the Thing but he and his council could only guide the Thing and all free men had the right to take part in the decision-making process. They voted on many things including, who owned a piece of land or what punishment a person would receive if they were found guilty of breaking the law.

The Vikings had no law books and the laws were not written down, but one person in every village was assigned the duty of law-speaker, a very important position in a settlement. Some laws applied to all Vikings but others were specific to the settlement, and the law-speaker had to know them all. He had to memorize the laws of the settlement and the broader Viking laws. If there was any confusion about a law during a Thing, the law-speaker would explain the law. After new laws were passed at a Thing, the law-speaker had to go to the law rock and recite all the laws so that the women, children, and slaves, who were not present at the Thing, would also know the laws.

The Thing was not only a time to make new laws but also to enforce the law and try men accused of committing crimes. During the Thing the accused could defend themselves and call witnesses. The rule of law was important to maintain order in the harsh and often violent Viking settlements and punishment could be severe. The ultimate penalty for violent crimes was usually to outlaw or banish the guilty. Outlaws were banished and had to flee their village and hide in the wilderness because anyone was allowed to hunt down and kill an outlaw. Outlaws also lost all their worldly possessions and property. Depending on the crime, the banishment could be permanent or for a set number of years. If a Viking was only outlawed for a certain time, they were usually allowed to keep their possessions and return to their homes when they had served their time. Lesser crimes could be settled by a fight, a holmgang or duel. This did not always end well for the victim, and justice was not necessarily on the side of the right, but since the Vikings believed the gods favored the righteous, the outcome was seen to be fair justice. Land could also be confiscated from the guilty and given to the victim.

Once a year, the clan gathered for an Allthing where all free men in a settlement were able to vote on important decisions, like taxes, peace treaties, the election of a new chief, or the adopting of new laws.

² *Norse society basically had three tiers. Jarls were the nobility, and Kings were drawn from this stratum of society. In Norse society, the position of king was not always guaranteed through succession. The jarls could unseat a weak or unpopular monarch if they united behind a rival claimant. In peacetime, the jarls oversaw the running of their lands, and during war and raids they commanded the longboat crews. The jarls venerated the god Odin for his wisdom and knowledge. The karls, or Norse middle class, were farmers, fishermen, and craftsmen. On raids or during wars, they crewed the longboats and were the rank and file of the Viking army. The kuskarls (house karls) served a jarl or king on his personal staff or as bodyguards. Thor was a principle deity of this class and was venerated for his honor and bravery as a warrior. The third strata of Norse society were the thralls, who were little more than slaves, convicted criminals, and captives from raids. Thralls had no rights and the killing of a thrall was considered destruction of property rather than murder. Viking raiders bought and sold slaves and captives from parts of Europe, Britain, and the Middle East so the thralls were not one ethnic or cultural group and could come from anywhere.*

Chapter 3 – Life in Greenland

There were two settlements on Greenland about 400 miles from each other. The Eastern Settlement ([Eystribyggð](#) at present-day [Qaqortoq](#)) and the Western Settlement (Vestribyggð which is close to present-day [Nuuk](#)). These were the only two areas that were suitable for farming and homesteads, and the settlements were widely dispersed so that there was enough land for each family to farm and enough grazing for cattle. The Book of the Settlements tells how Erik the Red built his family estate, [Brattahlíð](#) , in the Eastern Settlement at the head of the Tunulliarfik Fjord, approximately 96 kilometers from the coast. At the time, the Fjord was known as Eiríksfjord, and the area had some of the best farmland on the island because it was protected from the Arctic sea and cold, foggy coastal weather.

The settlers on Greenland built typical single roomed, low, rectangular-shaped Viking dwellings. The only difference between the homesteads in Scandinavia and those on Greenland was the building material. There were no great forests on Greenland and timber was scarce, so the walls of the houses were made of stone rather than wood. The remains of typical houses and farm buildings found on Greenland had stone walls, approximately 1.5 meters thick and covered with a turf outer bank to provide much-needed insulation. The houses also had flagstone floors rather than the more traditional earth covered ones with reeds.

The interior of a Norse house was plain and basic. A single room served as both living and sleeping area for the average Viking family. Reeds or flagstones covered the ground and damp rose up through the rough walls while the wind whistled through the small openings that served as windows. The smoke from the central cooking hearth swirled around the dark interior of the dwelling before escaping out of a hole in the reed roof. The lodgings may have provided shelter from the harsh weather, but there were few comforts. There would have been a table and a few stools where meals were eaten and rug-covered benches along the walls that served as beds. Eric the Red's dwelling may have had what were considered a few more luxuries than your average Viking, but it certainly wouldn't have been grand or lavish by today's standards. The house had more than one room and there might have been a tapestry or two hanging on the walls. The family

probably slept on straw-stuffed mattresses rather than hard benches, but the house would still have been dark, damp, and smoky.

The image of the Vikings as bloodthirsty warriors crossing the seas on their terrifying longboats to loot and pillage without mercy is one that has endured throughout the ages, but your average Norseman spent most of his life farming, trading, or working as a craftsman. The men were blacksmiths, fur traders, hunters, farmers, fishermen, and shipbuilders. They worked the land and grew crops such as wheat, barley, and rye and they tended to their livestock. The Greenlanders took sheep, goats, pigs, cattle, geese, and chickens with them.

During the summer when the weather improved around Greenland, each settlement would send men to hunt in Disko Bay above the Arctic Circle. They returned not only with meat that could be dried and eaten during the long winter months when fresh food was scarce, but also other valuable commodities such as seal pelts and walrus tusks which could be traded and sold so that they could buy much-needed timber from Norway and other supplies that they could not produce for themselves.

The women took care of the family; they raised the children, made the clothes, and cooked the meals. The food was basic, and they had to make do with what they could grow themselves or gather from the surrounding area. The Viking diet consisted mainly of bread, porridge, cabbage, onions, leeks, and wild berries. While to some modern people this subsistence lifestyle may sound like some kind of romantic idyll, it was anything but. It was a hard, perilous existence where daily life was often a grueling struggle for survival. The men may have been hunters and warriors, but the women were just as tough and had to look after their families when the men were away hunting or raiding.

But the life of a Viking settler was not all work and drudgery, there was also time for sport and other entertainment. The Vikings enjoyed wrestling, ice-skating, skiing, archery, and falconry. They demonstrated their strength with stone-lifting competitions and enjoyed a game called knattleikr that involved a ball, full body contact and, at times, a bat. These games would surely have provided a welcome respite from working the lands and caring for the livestock. But the games, which were often violent and could result in serious injury or even death, were not just pure entertainment; they also allowed the men to practice vital battle skills and improve their fighting techniques. The games also enabled young boys to learn the skills that they

would need to be great Viking warriors and to demonstrate their strength, agility and battle tactics. Leif Erikson would no doubt have taken part in many different Viking sports and games and been as eager as any other young Viking to show off his strength and battle skills to impress his father. Norsemen were accustomed to spending much of their time outdoors, but during the long, harsh winters they would have been forced to spend time indoors, and board games were a popular pass-time. They amused themselves playing dice, chess, and board games like Hnefatafl and Kvatrutafl. Kvatrutafl was a game similar to backgammon, and Hnefatafl was a type of war game that is thought to have helped teach players battle strategies. The Norsemen also enjoyed listening to stories, telling riddles, and playing musical instruments such as harps, horns, and pipes.

Storytelling and the reciting of sagas, especially those about the exploits of Viking heroes, were deeply ingrained in Norse society. During Viking feasts, Scandinavian bards called skalds³ recited epic poems or sagas that praised the brave deeds of Viking warriors and their prowess in battle. These sagas were important to the Vikings because before they converted to Christianity they had no written records of significant events, and their history was passed on through the sagas told by the skalds. This was their only way of preserving their history, and these sagas were often incredibly long and detailed. Some of the sagas, like the Saga of Eric the Red and the Saga of the Greenlanders, were eventually written down long after the events that they describe, but many were lost to history.

³ *One of the best-known Icelandic skald's is Snorri Sturluson. Snorri was born in Iceland in 1179 and became a wealthy and renowned poet and law-speaker. He wrote the Prose Edda, which, together with the Poetic Edda (written by Saemunder Sigfusson), has given modern historians much insight into Norse mythology. As a poet, Snorri would have heard many legends and tales that at the time only existed in oral form and may have decided to preserve these tales in the Prose Edda. He also composed the Heimskringla, a history of the kings of Norway from the ninth century to 1177. Snorri Sturluson is a good example of the importance of the skald in Scandinavian society. Without skalds, much of the history and culture of the Vikings would have been lost. It was skalds like Snorri Sturluson that kept the memory of Leif Erikson and his discovery of Vinland alive for future generations.*

Chapter 4 – Leif’s First Voyage

Leif was born to be a seafarer and adventurer. It was in his blood and part of his heritage. Leif’s early introduction to sailing, combined with regular crossings from Greenland to Iceland, gave him the seafaring and navigational skills that he needed when he set out with a small crew in search of the mysterious lands that he had heard lay to the west of Greenland. But it was not only seafaring skills that he acquired from his father, it was also confidence and determination. Leif probably believed that if his father could discover and settle a new land, there was no reason that he could not do the same. He may have wanted to emulate his father’s success or prove that he was as good of an explorer and leader. Or perhaps it was a desire for adventure and wealth that drove Leif to sail west into the unknown. Or maybe it was as a combination of all these factors. Too much time has passed for us to ever know what motivated Leif, but it is impossible to ignore the fact that he was the son of a great Norse explorer and leader, and he obviously inherited many of his father’s traits.

Erik the Red was obviously a natural leader. He persuaded 300 people to leave their homes and sail across the treacherous ocean to settle an unknown, but by all accounts, inhospitable, land. Those who joined Erik’s colonizing party obviously had many and varied reasons for leaving Iceland, but the fact that he was able to persuade so many to go with him is testament to his competence and leadership. Clearly, these people trusted him and were willing to follow him to a land that they had never seen because he persuaded them that it could offer them a better life. When the settler party reached Greenland, Erik was elected paramount chieftain of the colonists in the Eastern settlement where he established his homestead. His position ultimately gave him great wealth and power, but settling this new territory was by no means easy. Building homesteads and shelters before the onset of the first harsh winter, hunting game to feed the settlers. and finding enough grazing for the livestock would have been all-consuming.

The daily struggle against a harsh environment bred hard men, and Leif was no exception. He grew up surrounded by hard, often violent role models. His father and grandfather were no strangers to violence, and both had murdered fellow Norsemen and been outlawed for their crimes. Both Erik the Red and Leif Erikson left their homelands when they were young and traveled with their families to settle in new territories. These early

experiences would undoubtedly have had an effect on their characters and taught them how to survive and thrive in the harsh conditions of a new settlement. From an early age, Leif would have learned the skills he needed to be an effective colonist. He would have learned how to be a successful hunter, fisherman, seafarer, and warrior but more importantly than that, having grown up surrounded by adventurous men and women who were not afraid to strike out on their own, explore new territories, and establish settlements in hostile environments, Leif Erikson would probably have been encouraged to make his own mark on the world. He certainly would not have wanted to spend his entire life in his father's large and imposing shadow.

At the age of 24, Leif was ready to captain his first voyage, and he went eastward to the homeland of his family. Around 997 AD, he set sail for Norway with a crew of fourteen men (including Thryker), bearing gifts for King Olaf Tryggvason. At the time, it was not unusual for young men to serve as retainers in the household of a king or chief, and this was an opportunity for Leif to forge alliances that would gain him status and political influence that could help him in the future.

But Leif's first voyage was not all smooth sailing. It started off well enough. The weather was fair and the wind was good when Leif set sail from Greenland. Unfortunately, after their first day at sea, the wind died down and it took them five days to reach Iceland, a voyage that usually only took two days. Initially, the crew wanted to go ashore at Iceland, but Leif decided to bypass the island and continue sailing toward Norway. They sailed on, and when they finally sighted land again, they realized that the land they could see was the Hebrides. They had sailed further south than they had intended.

Leif and his crew had to go ashore on the Hebrides to restock their boat with food and supplies. While they were still on the island, a storm rolled in and the boat could not leave the Hebrides for more than a month. During this time, Leif stayed in the house of the chief of the island and there, his striking appearance apparently caught the attention of the local chief's daughter, Thorgunna. Before Leif left the Hebrides, he conceived a son, Thorgils, with Thorgunna. Although Leif acknowledged his son's paternity, he and Thorgunna never married, and Thorgils spent most of his childhood in the Hebrides with his mother. Later, he was sent to Greenland to live with

his father, but by all accounts, he was never very popular with the Greenlanders.

After the storm cleared, Leif left the pregnant Thorgunna in the Hebrides and continued his voyage to Norway. On this leg of his voyage, the wind was favorable, and it only took a few days to make the crossing from the Hebrides to Norway. When he arrived in Norway, he was welcomed to the court of King Olaf who knew his father. King Olaf was another powerful and adventurous man who had a significant influence on the life of Leif Erikson.

The king was clearly impressed with the young Leif and invited him to spend the winter with him in Norway. Leif accepted this generous offer and by all accounts enjoyed his time in the Norwegian monarch's court, enjoying the luxuries that it had to offer. The time that Leif spent with King Olaf was to have a lasting impression on the young man. One of the greatest impacts that King Olaf had on Leif's life was his conversion to Christianity. Until that time, Leif, like the rest of his family and the other settlers on Greenland, had worship pagan Norse gods.⁴

Little is known about the birth and early life of King Olaf Tryggvason, but he became a mighty Viking warrior who acquired great wealth and fame by raiding and plundering throughout Europe, and he was the first Christian king of Norway. King Olaf was not born a Christian. Being a Norseman, he would have been raised to worship the same pagan gods that the Greenlanders and many other Norwegians worshipped at the time, but he later converted to Christianity. King Olaf probably converted to Christianity during his campaign in Britain around 994, and by the time he brought the Christian faith to Norway, most of Western Europe was already Christian.

In 996, King Olaf returned to Norway and after a Thing, he was proclaimed king. As king, he set about converting all of Norway to Christianity, and he did so in a brutal manner. Pagan temples were destroyed, and churches were built in their place. Those who refused to convert were killed, tortured, maimed, or banished. After bringing Christianity to Norway, King Olaf was determined to spread his religion to the outlying areas of Iceland and Greenland. In Iceland, Christianity was adopted at an Althing in the year 1000 (after the Greenlanders had already left the island). Conversion in Greenland was never mandated by an Althing and was a more gradual process.

In order to spread Christianity to the distant shores of Greenland, King Olaf needed a convert with influence in the settlements and in Leif, he found just such a person: a young man who he was able to convert to the faith and task with spreading Christianity to Greenland. Before Leif and his crew returned to Greenland, they all converted and were baptized in their new faith. According to Erik's Saga, King Olaf set Leif the task of converting his fellow Greenlanders to Christianity and even sent a priest back to Greenland with him.

Leif took his mission from King Olaf seriously, and on his return set about teaching his fellow Greenlanders about his new faith and converting them to Christianity. Like his father, Leif obviously had the ear of the people and knew how to persuade them to his way of thinking. Using his influence and reputation as a man of fair judgment and honesty, Leif was able to convert many Greenlanders, including his mother, Thjodhild, to his new faith. Leif's father, however, was a different matter, and he clung to his old Norse ways and continued to worship his pagan gods. No matter how hard he tried, Leif was never able to convert his father to Christianity, and Erik the Red died a pagan. But Thjodhild became an avid supporter of the Christian faith and records indicate that she commissioned Greenland's first church. In 1932, a group of Danish archaeologists excavating Brattahlid (Erik the Red's homestead) found the remains of what they assume is Thjodhild's church. As a preeminent Norse seafarer and explorer, Leif Erikson redefined the Viking world, and his conversion to Christianity changed the beliefs of the society he lived in. These are remarkable achievements and show both the character of Leif and the standing that he had in the community.

⁴ *Religion and beliefs were very important to people throughout Europe and, like most pagans, the Norsemen were superstitious and worshipped many different gods. In the Viking view of the world, there was Asgard, the home of the gods. Asgard was a huge fortified castle that floated in the air. At the edge of the world lived the giants, and the Vikings equated them with chaos and destruction. They were related to the Nordic gods and battled with them continuously. In the Nordic legends, Thor often went out to hunt giants. The Norsemen believed that at the end of the world, the gods, giants, and humans would meet in one final deadly battle. The pagan Norsemen worshipped gods like Odin, Freya, Thor, and many others. In Norse mythology, Odin is the ruler of the deities, a war god and a seeker of*

wisdom, and Freya is his wife. Thor, who, thanks to popular media, is probably the best known of the Norse gods, is Odin's son and the god of thunder. Thor is an embodiment of many qualities that are traditionally associated with the Vikings. He is a mighty warrior, a fearless traveler, and his courage, strength, and loyalty are legendary. Leif would have spent many long winter days in his parents' dark, smoky homestead listening to tales of the exploits of Thor, and he would probably have aspired to emulate this Norse god. Another deity who would have been of great significance to Erik the Red, Leif, and other seafaring Norsemen was Aegir, who was loved and feared in equal measure as the commander of the sea. Aegir and his wife, Ran, were said to dwell in a magnificent hall beneath the ocean. While Aegir is portrayed as a gracious host, Ran is depicted as drowning unfortunate sailors and dragging them down to dwell in the magnificent hall beneath the ocean. Whenever a Norse ship sank, it was said that the sailors were dining in Aegir's Hall, and Norwegian seafarers had a deep respect for the ruler of the seas.

Chapter 5 – Mysterious Lands to the West of Greenland

King Olaf himself had set Leif the task of converting the Greenlanders to Christianity, and by all accounts he took his mission seriously, but even so, Leif did not remain on the island for long after he returned from Norway. Having been raised by an adventurous father, Leif had clearly developed an adventurous spirit of his own, and before long, he felt the urge to travel and explore. Maybe his voyage to Norway had awakened a wanderlust in the young Norseman, or perhaps Leif found the drudgery of life on Greenland boring, or maybe his ambitions were stifled by his father. We will never know for certain what drove Leif to leave Greenland and go in search of a land that he wasn't even sure existed, but what we do know is that shortly after returning from Norway, Leif embarked on the greatest adventure of his life. A voyage that would make him famous, not only in his own time, but would also ensure his place in world history.

Like most great historical events, Leif's discovery of Vinland did not take place within a vacuum. It was not an isolated incident or random turn of events that led this renowned seafarer and navigator to the shores of the North American continent. The story of the discovery of Vinland began many years before Leif made his epic voyage.

For many years, the honor of being the first European to set foot in North America was given to Christopher Columbus, the Italian explorer, navigator, and colonizer, who landed on the continent in 1492. While the contribution that this great European explorer made to history cannot be underestimated, it is now widely acknowledged that he was not the first European to discover the continent. That honor has now been placed squarely on the broad shoulders of Leif Erikson and today, few historians dispute the fact that Leif beat Columbus to North America by almost 500 years.

Historians may well agree that Erikson discovered North America, but unfortunately, they still cannot reach a consensus on whether this discovery was on purpose or by accident. Most historical knowledge of Erikson's discovery of North America comes from sagas and other ancient sources, written decades after his voyage. There are no contemporary accounts of Erikson's voyage or the settlement he established at Vinland.

There are, however, two main sagas that relate to the discovery of Vinland. These are the Groenlendinga Saga (Saga of the Greenlanders) and Eirik's Saga,⁵ and both were written in Iceland approximately 250 years after the Vikings had been to Vinland. While both sagas were written at much the same time and both mention Leif's voyage across the Atlantic, that is where the similarity ends, and the two accounts differ considerably.

According to Eirik's Saga, Leif's sighting of the North American continent was entirely accidental. In Eirik's Saga, Leif Erikson sails from Greenland to Norway and stays in King Olaf Tryggvason's household for the winter, but on his return journey he is blown off course, and when he eventually sights land, it is not Greenland but some other unknown landmass. The land he stumbles upon is nothing like Greenland, with its glaciers and harsh climate. Leif later describes the land as green and fertile, with dense forests and an abundance of wild grapes. Leif names the land Vinland (most likely because of the grapes) and he and his crew establish a small village where they can spend the winter in relative comfort. After the winter, Leif and his men sail back to Greenland and never return to Vinland. After that Leif, almost entirely disappears from the saga and the Icelandic Thorfinn Karlsefni becomes the hero of the story. It is Thorfinn who sets out on an expedition to found a settlement in North America.

The Groenlendinga Saga tells a different tale. In this version of events, it is not Leif who is blown off course and stumbles across the North American continent but rather a man named Bjarni's Herjolfsson. According to the Groenlendinga Saga (Saga of the Greenlanders), Bjarni Herjolfsson was an Icelandic trader and the son of Herjolfr Bardarson. Bjarni traded between Norway and Iceland and was by all accounts a very able seafarer and navigator. When he returned to Eyrarbakki, Iceland, from one of his trading voyages, he discovered that his parents had left the island with Erik the Red to settle on Greenland. Bjarni decided to follow his parents to Greenland but never having been to the island before; he had to rely on his considerable navigational skills and a description of Greenland to find the place.

He and his crew were blown off course by stormy weather, and the first land they sighted was nothing like the description they had of Greenland. What they saw was a land that was hilly, fertile, and covered in great forests. As Bjarni and his crew sailed further north along the coast, they did see some snow-covered mountains but no great glaciers and fields of ice.

Bjarni quickly realized that this could not possibly be Greenland, and he changed course and sailed on without setting foot on land. When he eventually made it to Greenland, he mentioned the land he had seen. At the time, none of the newly settled Greenlanders went in search of this land, and it was only years later that Leif made his voyage. If one assumes that Bjarni was blown in a southwesterly direction from Iceland, then it was probably Newfoundland, Baffin Island, and the Labrador Coast that he had seen.

Because no contemporary accounts exist of Leif Erikson's discovery and settlement on the North American continent, it is impossible to know which account is more accurate. But if one considers that Leif Erikson didn't act in isolation, then it appears to be more likely that he set out to find the mysterious land that Bjarni had seen to the west of Greenland rather than stumbled upon it. Leif Erikson was a product of his time. He grew up during the Viking age. He was an accomplished seafarer and warrior, and his father was a respected Viking explorer who discovered and settled Greenland. If you consider all these facts, it is highly likely that his discovery was a deliberate act rather than a navigational miscalculation or accident.

Another part of the story that leads one to believe that it was a planned expedition is the notion that Erik the Red was originally going to accompany his son on the voyage. Unfortunately, Erik was ruled by his superstitions and legend has it that he fell off his horse shortly before they were due to set sail. Although not seriously injured, he saw it as a bad omen and decided not to join the expedition. This may have been unfortunate for Erik, but maybe not so bad for Leif. Who knows how history would have recorded the story if Erik the Red had accompanied his son across the Atlantic? Maybe Erik would have been credited with being the leader of the expedition and the discovery of the North American continent, and Leif would have been relegated to a mere footnote in history. Perhaps it would have been Erik's achievements that are celebrated throughout America and his statues erected in numerous American cities. Erik the Red was undoubtedly an ambitious man and a natural leader, and it is hard to see him standing back and allowing his son to take all the glory.

When Bjarni reached Greenland, he settled there with his parents, and when his father died, he inherited his estate and spent the rest of his life on the island. Bjarni arrived in Greenland approximately fifteen years before Leif

Erikson made his historic voyage to North America. Growing up on Greenland, Leif would no doubt have heard the stories of the mysterious land Bjarni had seen to the west. Some scholars suggest that Leif may even have heard the stories directly from Bjarni and, considering that the settlement on Greenland was not particularly large, this is highly possible. But even if Leif had not heard the stories directly from the Icelandic trader, he would have known about the land, and he would have heard descriptions of the thick forests along the coast. This would most definitely have piqued Leif's interest because, while Greenland had grazing for livestock and land to farm along the fjords, it did not have large forests, and timber was in short supply on the island. Timber was a vitally important commodity to the Vikings, especially for shipbuilding. A reliable source of timber would have been highly sought after by the settlers.

Timber was central to the Norse way of life, and it enabled them to become the powerhouse they were during the Viking Age. It was necessary for building houses, but just as importantly, it was essential for building Viking longboats. Norway's vast pine forests combined with Norse shipbuilding skills allowed them to not only raid other settlements but also explore and settle new lands. A source of good timber was vital to their age of exploration and expansion but, unfortunately, there were no great forests on Iceland or Greenland. Before Leif traveled to North America, the settlers had to import timber from Norway to build longboats or, alternatively, they would have bought their longboats from Norwegian boat builders.

The Norse settlements on Greenland and Iceland were predominately farming settlements, but ships were still central to their survival in these far-flung regions. Not only did the ships allow the settlers to trade with other settlements, but having good, strong longboats meant they could fish and hunt whales and seals in Disko Bay above the Arctic Circle.

⁵ *The Sagas*

Much of what is known about the history of Greenland and the discovery of Vinland come from two Icelandic sagas, namely the Sage of Erik the Red and the Saga of the Greenlanders. Both sagas are based on stories persevered for generations by oral traditions and were written in Iceland approximately 250 years after the events they describe. While both sagas make reference to Leif Erikson and his voyage to the North American

continent and contain similar elements, they also differ greatly. Here is a brief summary of the two sagas.

The Saga of the Greenlanders (Groenlendinga Saga)

The Saga of the Greenlanders not only describes Leif's voyage to Vinland but also subsequent voyages to the new land. The Saga of the Greenlanders describes how Bjarni Herjolfsson accidentally discovers a new land to the west of Greenland in about 986 and how fifteen years later, five expeditions are made to Vinland, although one voyage, led by Leif's brother, Thorstein, fails to reach its goal. In this version of the discovery of Vinland, Bjarni does not go ashore. He only sees the landmass from his boat but when he realizes it cannot possibly be Greenland because there are no glaciers and ice-flows, he sails on without making landfall. When Bjarni finally reaches Greenland, he settles on his father's farm and there he remains. He never attempts to mount an expedition to return to the mysterious land that he had seen. He does, however, tell his story to other settlers on Greenland, and this ultimately inspires Leif Erikson to organize an expedition to explore this land some fifteen years later. In the Saga of the Greenlanders, Leif is the main explorer of Vinland, and he establishes a base camp at Leifsbudir. This serves as a boat repair station, storage area for timber and grapes before they are shipped to Greenland, and a base for subsequent expeditions.

Leif retraces Bjarni's route in reverse past Helluland (land of flat stone) and Markland (land of forests), and then he sails on across the open sea for another two days until he finds a headland with an island just offshore and a pool accessible to ships at high tide. Leif and his crew made landfall in the area and established a base. They name the place Vinland and the winter is described as mild rather than freezing, and it is in this area that Thyrker is reputed to have found an abundance of wild grapes. In the spring, Leif returns to Greenland with a boatload of timber and grapes. Leif never returns to Vinland. The second expedition to Vinland is led by Leif's older brother, Thorvald, with a crew of about 40 men. This group spends three winters at the base that Leif had established and named Leifsbudir. They explore the west coast of the new land in the first summer, and the east coast in the second summer.

During their exploration of the area, they make contact with the local inhabitants that they called Skraelings, and violence breaks out. After killing some Skraelings, the Norse explorers are attacked by a large force,

and an arrow fatally wounds Thorvald. The following spring, the remaining Greenlanders decide to return home. Leif's younger brother, Thorstein, leads a third expedition to Vinland to recover Thorvald's body, but he is driven off course and spends the summer wandering aimlessly in the Atlantic before returning to Greenland, having failed in his mission. The following winter, Thorstein dies from illness, and his widow, Gudrid, marries Thorfinn Karlsefni, an Icelfander. Thorfinn agrees to lead another expedition to Vinland. This is a larger expedition, and Gudrid accompanies her husband, taking livestock with them. Gudrid gives birth to a son, Snorri, in Vinland, but shortly after his birth, the group is attacked by the local inhabitants. They manage to retreat to a defensive position and are able to survive the attack. The following summer, they return to Greenland with a cargo of gapes, timber, and hides. Shortly after this, Leif's sister, Freydis, persuades the captain of an Icelandic ship to mount an expedition to Vinland. They set sail in the autumn and spend the winter at Leif's camp, but a disagreement leads to the killing of the Icelanders. The Greenlanders then return home with their cargo. This is the last Vinland expedition recorded in the Saga of the Greenlanders. According to the Saga of the Greenlanders, Leif's voyage to Vinland was planned and deliberate.

The Saga of Erik the Red (Eirik's Saga)

In this version of the story, Leif accidentally discovers the North American continent on his return to Greenland following a visit to King Olaf Tryggvason in Norway. Leif spends a winter in the household of King Olaf where he is converted to Christianity. King Olaf then commissions Leif to spread Christianity to Greenland and convert the Greenlanders to the faith. On his return voyage, he is blown off course during a storm and makes landfall on a mysterious land where he spends the winter. On his return to Greenland, he brings with him not only the Christian religion but also a cargo of grapes, wheat, and timber. He also rescues survivors from a wrecked ship, and this earns him the nickname Leif the Lucky, and his religious conversion of the Greenlanders is a resounding success.

The Saga of Erik the Red, like the Saga of the Greenlanders, states that this was the only voyage that Leif made to Vinland. In the spring after Leif returned, his younger brother, Thorstein, leads the next expedition to the new land but is driven off course by a storm and spends the entire summer wandering aimlessly in the Atlantic. He returns to Greenland without ever making it to Vinland. On his return, Thorstein marries Gudrid, but he dies

of illness in the winter. The following winter, Gudrid marries a visiting Icelander named Thorfinn Karlsefni. He agrees to undertake the largest expedition to Vinland. His wife accompanies him on this voyage, and they also take livestock with them. They are accompanied by another pair of Icelanders, Bjarni Grimolfsson and Thorhall Gamlason, as well as Leif's older brother, Thorvald, his sister, Freydis, and her husband, Thorvard. They sail past Helluland and Markland and continue past some extraordinary long beaches before landing along the coast and sending out two scouts to explore the land. After three days, they return with grapes and wheat.

The expedition sails on until they come to an inlet with an island just offshore and there they make camp. This camp is called Straumfjord. The winter is apparently harsh, and food is scarce. When spring comes, Thorhall Gamlason wants to sail north to find Vinland, but Thorfinn Karlsefni wants to sail southward. Thorhall takes nine men and sails north, but his vessel is swept out to sea and never seen again. Thorfinn and the rest sail down the east coast with approximately 40 men and establish a camp on the shore of a lagoon. The settlement was known as Hop, and there they found an abundance of wild grapes and wheat. How long they stay there is unclear. They have contact with the local people (Skraelings). The first encounter is peaceful. Later, they return and trade with the Norse. One day, the local people are frightened by the Greenlanders' bull and they attack the explorers. They manage to survive the attack by retreating to a more defensive position. After that, the explorers abandon their southern camp and sail North again. Karlsefni and Thorvald Eriksson take a crew and sail in search of Thorhall. They once again have a hostile encounter with the local people, and Thorvald is shot with an arrow before dying from his wound. The explorers remain on the continent for one more winter, but the situation is tense, and there are disagreements among them. The following summer, they abandon their venture and start the return voyage to Greenland. This is the last Vinland expedition recorded in the Saga of Erik the Red.

A notable difference between the two sagas is that in the Saga of Erik the Red, Leif's role has been reduced to that of accidental discoverer of Vinland, and Thorfinn Karlsefni is the main explorer of Vinland. Bjarni Herjolfsson's voyage fifteen years earlier is not mentioned. In the Saga of the Greenlanders, there are five attempted expeditions to Vinland over the

course of a number of years, but in Erik's saga, there is only one mega-expedition after Leif discovers Vinland. The name Leifsbudir does not appear in the Saga of Erik the Red and instead there are two camps, Straumfjord (Fjord of currents) and Hop (Tidal Lagoon). Straumfjord is the main base where the explorers spend the winter. Hop is a summer camp where timber is cut and grapes are collected and then shipped to Straumfjord before being taken to Greenland. The reasons for the differences in the two sagas is unclear. Both were based on oral histories and written long after the actual events, so it could be as simple as two different interpretations with different authors placing different emphasis on different events. Bearing in mind that Icelanders wrote both versions, they might have had different agendas, and the writer of the Saga of Erik the Red may have wanted to make the Icelanders' contribution to the discovery of Vinland the significant part of the story. Therefore, Thorfinn Karlsefni's role is greatly embellished, and Leif Erikson is only mentioned briefly. The details of the two sagas may differ greatly but the fundamental premise that Leif Erikson was the first European to land on the North American continent is common to both.

Chapter 6 – Voyage to Vinland

Around the year 1000, Leif gathered a small group of around 35 men, including his mentor, Thryker, and supplies and set off to search for and explore the mysterious forested land that Herjolfsson claimed lay in a westerly direction. Some of the sagas even suggest that Erikson bought or borrowed Bjarni Herjolfsson's longboat to use on his epic voyage. When Leif Erikson set sail from Greenland, he earned his place in the history books as one of the greatest Norse explorers and the first European to set foot on the North American continent.

Even though Leif and his crew set sail in the summer, crossing the Atlantic Ocean so far north in an open longboat would have been a treacherous undertaking, and the crew would most likely have been plagued by high seas and ice flows. But these harsh conditions did not deter them. Leif and his crew were brave men and experienced seafarers, and they would not have turned back easily. It is uncertain how long the voyage took them, but the Saga of the Greenlanders claims that Leif and his crew made landfall at three different sites. The first place that they are believed to have landed was an icy and inhospitable region Erikson named "Helluland." This was a place of flat stone and ice. From there, they sailed on until they came to a heavily forested stretch of coastline that they called "Markland." They did not, however, choose to establish any sort of settlement there and sailed further south along the coast, quite possibly looking for a more suitable place to build a base camp. Approximately two days later, they came to a headland with an island just offshore. This appeared to be a more hospitable area than Helluland and Markland, and Leif decided to build his camp there and named the area Vinland.

The most common explanation for the name is apparently due to the abundance of wild grapes that the Vikings found growing in the area. But even this is open to interpretation and is still being debated by historians and scholars around the world. Some historians argue that the name cannot refer to grapes because if the settlement was far north then there would not have been wild grapes growing in abundance. Others claim that the grapes that are referred to in the name and apparently grew wild in Vinland may have been redcurrants or berries. In Scandinavian countries, there is a tradition of making wine by fermenting berries. However, if the Norsemen had traveled as far south as the St. Lawrence River and parts of New

Brunswick, then they may indeed have found wild grapes. Another suggestion is that the name actually means “land of meadows” or “land of pastures.”

There is also much debate as to exactly where Helluland, Markland, and Vinland were. Helluland means “Land of the Stones” or “Flat-Stone Land,” and many historians now believe that this was most likely Baffin Island. The second place Leif and his crew made landfall they named Markland, which means “Woodland,” and this is quite possibly Labrador. The exact location of the third landing place, Vinland, remains controversial, and it could have been as far north as Newfoundland or as far south as Cape Cod.

What is known is that the land that Leif and his crew found was far more hospitable than their native Greenland or Iceland. The ground was fertile, and there was abundant game to hunt. There was ample grazing, and the salmon and other fish in the rivers and lakes were large and plentiful. Most likely due to these favorable conditions, Leif and his crew decided to winter in Vinland and set about establishing a small settlement in a place they referred to as Leifsbudir (Leif’s camp). They harvested timber not only to build their houses but also to take back to Greenland. The Norsemen were undoubtedly surprised by the mildness of the winter compared to what they were used to in Greenland. With the fertile soil and mild climate, it would have been possible to grow crops in the area if the Norsemen wanted to and being frost-free meant that it would not have been necessary to grow and store fodder for livestock in the winter. Legend has it that it was Thyrker who first discovered grapes on Vinland. In the spring, Leif and his crew returned to Greenland with a boatload of timber and grapes.

On his return voyage, Leif and his crew are said to have rescued the crew and salvaged the cargo of a trading vessel that had run aground on some rocks. This earned him the nickname “Leif the Lucky.”

Leif only spent only one winter in Vinland before returning to Greenland with his precious cargo of timber and grapes. According to historical records, this is the only trip that Leif ever made to Vinland, and it is not known why he never returned to the rich and fertile North American continent.

What is known is that his father died around this time, either while Leif was still in North America or shortly after his return to Greenland. Whether this influenced his decision to not return to Vinland we do not know. Once Erik

and his followers had established a settlement on Greenland, they were followed by other migrants who helped expand and build the colony. However, one such group of immigrants, who arrived in 1002, brought with them an [epidemic](#) that ravaged the colony, killing many of its leading [citizens](#), including the mighty man himself, Erik the Red. When Erik died in 1003, Leif became chief of the Eastern Settlement and lived Brattahlid for the rest of his life. When Leif died in 1025, his son, Thorkel Leifsson, became chief of the Eastern Settlement. After that, there is no further mention of any of Leif's descendants in history.

Leif and Thjodhild may have converted to Christianity, but when Erik died he was still a pagan who worshipped his Norse gods, and it is most likely that he received a pagan burial.⁶

⁶ *It is impossible to know what Erik expected the afterlife to be like, as Norse paganism does not appear to have any consistent notion of the fate of the dead. However, most Vikings did believe in some kind of Land of the Dead and the most famous is undoubtedly Valhalla (the Hall of the Fallen), the hall of the god Odin. Little is known or recorded about the other Lands of the Dead but the goddess Freya is reputed to have welcomed some of the dead to her hall, Folkvang (the field of the people). Some, but not all, Vikings who died at sea were believed to reside in the underwater realm of the giant Aegir and his wife, Ran. The most common Land of the Dead or afterlife world in Norse paganism is Hel, an underground world presided over by a goddess named Hel. Vikings believed that here they would eat, drink, fight, sleep, and do most of the things that they had done while they were alive. Snorri Sturluson claimed that Viking warriors who died in battle went to Valhalla, and those who died under more peaceful circumstances were destined for Hel. This is an overly simplistic explanation of their beliefs, and one has to bear in mind that Snorri was writing as a Christian at a time when Norse paganism was no longer a living tradition. This simple explanation was most likely Snorri's interpretation of the Norse Lands of the Dead.*

Chapter 7 – Subsequent Voyages to Vinland

Leif only made one voyage to Vinland but his discovery of North America assured his place in history as the first European to establish a settlement on the continent. Leif, himself, may not have returned to Vinland but his was not the one and only voyage that the Greenlanders made to North America. The settlement Leif and his crew had established on the continent remained, and more Greenlanders made the voyage across the ocean to settle, albeit temporarily, in this new land.

After Leif's historic voyage to Vinland, there were a number of other expeditions. These may have been merely to harvest timber and grapes or to try and establish a more permanent settlement on the continent. Erik the Red's courage and pioneering spirit appears to have influenced all his children, and they all followed in Leif's footsteps and attempted to make the voyage to Vinland at one time or another. Whether they were driven by a desire to emulate their father and establish a new settlement, to find a more hospitable and moderate climate to settle in, or merely to harvest timber, we will never know. Unfortunately, not all their voyages were successful.

The first of Leif's siblings to make the treacherous Atlantic crossing was his older brother, Thorvald. Thorvald used Leif's boat and followed his directions to make his way to Vinland. He spent approximately two years sailing along the coast, exploring the land, and harvesting timber and grapes. But of course, this was not an uninhabited territory, and the more time the Greenlanders spent on the North American continent the more they came into contact with the native population (called *skraelings* by the Norsemen). They would most likely have traded with some of the Native American tribes they encountered, but more contact also led to conflict and skirmishes between the Greenlanders and local tribes. Thorvald Erikson was eventually killed in a skirmish with Native Americans and is the first European known to have died and been buried on North American soil. His crew buried him at a place they named Crossness. His crew did not remain in North America for long after Thorvald's death and returned to Greenland with timber and grapes.

After Thorvald's death, Leif's younger brother, Thorstein tried to make the crossing to Vinland in order to take Thorvald's body back to Greenland. Unfortunately, his voyage was hampered by fierce storms and high seas,

and he was unable to reach the shores of Vinland and had to return to Greenland without his brother's body.

Thorfinn Karlsefni, an Icelandic trader, led another expedition to Vinland. Thorfinn, along with his wife, Gudrid, stayed in Vinland for three years and their son, Snorri, was born there. This made Snorri the first European child to be born on the North American continent. Unfortunately, relations between the Icelandic settlers and the local tribes were hostile, and eventually they abandoned their settlement and returned to their homeland.

Leif's sister, Freydis led the last recorded expedition to Vinland. According to the Greenland Saga, Freydis traveled to Vinland with two Icelandic traders and their crews, and she had her men kill the Icelanders before they returned to Greenland. No explanation is given for her actions. This is the last recorded expedition of Greenlanders to Vinland, but Icelandic records do mention an attempt by an Icelandic bishop, Eric Gnipsson, to visit Vinland from Greenland in 1121. Nothing more is written about Eric Gnipsson, and three years later a new bishop, named Arnald, is sent to Greenland. In 1347, reference is made in Icelandic records of a ship that arrived in Iceland with a boatload of timber from Markland. Apparently, the ship had been blown off course on its way home to Greenland. This record indicates that even though the Greenlanders abandoned their settlement on Vinland, they may have continued to harvest timber from the North American continent.

Chapter 8 – Master shipbuilders

Leif Erikson was clearly a remarkable man who was raised to be brave and adventurous. He was also obviously a master seafarer and navigator and these skills would have enabled him to cross the often-treacherous waters of the Atlantic Ocean and sail south along the coast of the North American continent until he found a suitable place to build a settlement. But it was not just his character and skills that made the voyage possible. Without the experience and incredible craftsmanship of Norwegian master shipbuilders, he would never have had the tools to cross the ocean and complete his historic voyage to Vinland. Norse shipbuilding was advanced for the age and the longboats these men designed and built enabled the Vikings to reach a height of naval power unheard of before in the region. Their longboats allowed them to conquer large areas of Europe, Britain, and the Middle East and ensured that their culture and influence spread across the known world. The typical longboat was wide and stable with a shallow draught that enabled it to travel upriver and land on beaches, but it was also a good seagoing vessel. The boats were light and fast, and there was nothing to rival them at the time.

The longboats had many uses. They were used to transport troops to battles and could also be tied together to form floating platforms for offshore battles. During the ninth century, the longboats played a pivotal role in the age of Viking expansion. With these remarkable boats, the Vikings were able to travel upriver and attack inland towns and cities such as Rouen in 841 and Hamburg in 845. The Vikings' enemies often referred to the longboats as "dragon ships" because of their dragon-shaped bow.

While the longboats are most famous for the role that they played in Viking raids and attacks, these boats were more than just warships. A longboat could be used in various ways and for a variety of missions. They could be used for fishing, seal and whale hunting, or to transport livestock, goods, and people over vast stretches of open water. The longboats were vital for trade and the exploration of new territories.

There were a number of different types of longboats, and mostly they were classified by the number of rowing positions on board. The Karvi was the smallest Viking longboat and had between 6 and 16 benches. This was a general-purpose vessel that was used for fishing and trade but could also be used in battle. The Snekkja had at least 20 rowing benches and could carry

a crew of approximately 41 men. Snekkjas were useful in raids because they were light and could be beached or easily carried across portages. Skeids were larger warships and had more than 30 rowing benches and could carry around 70 to 80 men.

In 1926, Norwegian shipbuilders in Korgen built a replica of the type of longboat that Leif Erikson would have used on his journey to Vinland. The ship, named the Leif Erikson, was 42-foot-long and Captain Gerhard Folgero and his crew sailed it from Bergen, Norway, to North America. The ship stopped at the Shetland Islands, Faroe Islands, Iceland, and Greenland before crossing the Atlantic. On 20 July 1926, they docked at St. John's, Newfoundland. From there, they sailed south along the coast to Boston, Massachusetts, and finally reached Duluth in Minnesota on 23 June 1927. It was not an easy voyage, and the ship encountered heavy seas and even became ice-locked near Greenland, but this voyage proved that the Vikings were more than capable of sailing from Greenland to North America with their longboats.

Another useful tool in the Viking seafarers' arsenal was their exceptional navigational techniques. These skills allowed them to explore the ocean and discover new lands. They could travel far from land, establish trading posts in new territories and settlements in areas that had until then been inaccessible or hard to reach. While Viking navigational techniques are not well understood, it is clear that they were experts at judging speed, currents and wind direction and predicting tides. Norse traders regularly traveled between Norway, Iceland, and Greenland and, therefore, it was not unrealistic for them to attempt the crossing to North America.

But sailing over vast distances in open longboats took more than just remarkable shipbuilding ability, navigational skills, and seamanship, all of which the Norsemen clearly had in abundance; it also took courage. Traversing the deep sea was not for the faint-hearted. Ice on the rigging that could add crushing weight to the longboats was a constant danger in the northern seas. The men and women who made these voyages were remarkable people. They had the courage to sail across treacherous open waters and brave storms, fog, and ice to settle new lands. Women and children traveled alongside their husbands and fathers to colonize new lands and endured great hardships, pain, and deprivation without complaint. They too would have had to have a great deal of courage and resourcefulness in

order to survive these voyages and carve out a new life for their families in harsh and unforgiving environments.

These were not people who were afraid to strike out on their own and make new lives in unknown lands, but in order to do so, they needed strong and competent leadership. It is clear that both Erik the Red and his son, Leif Erikson, possessed such qualities. Both were able to persuade people to join them on perilous voyages into the unknown, and this is an indication of the kind of men they must have been. They obviously inspired confidence in others, and people trusted them to make good decisions and act in the best interest of the group. Leading an expedition to unknown lands would have been a great responsibility, but it is clear that Leif Erikson was up to the task. He was able to navigate his way across the Atlantic to North America, establish a settlement, albeit temporary, and return to Greenland with a cargo of timber and grapes. He was also chosen as his father's successor in the Eastern Settlement and must have possessed good leadership skills.

Chapter 9 – The discovery of L’Anse aux Meadows

Most historians agree that Leif Erikson was the first European to set foot on North American soil and that the Norseman and his crew established some sort of settlement on this vast continent. The exact nature of this settlement, however, remains unclear and for various reasons, the Greenlanders never managed to establish a permanent and lasting settlement in this new territory. No records exist from this time, and the main source of historical information regarding the Norse voyages to Vinland is based on the Saga of the Greenlanders and the Saga of Erik the Red or on historical and archaeological finds in Greenland and North America. One of the difficulties that scholars face when interpreting the sagas is that both are based on oral histories and were only written approximately 250 years after the events they describe. These sagas talk about Leif Erikson’s voyage to Vinland and describe the land he found, but they do not indicate exactly where Leif and his crew spent the winter on the North American continent. There are also no maps that survive from this time, and archaeologists and historians have to rely on secondhand descriptions to try and pinpoint the exact site where Leif settled. Due to this lack of accurate historical information, uncertainty still exists regarding the exact location of Vinland, and there are various theories about where Leif and his crew spent the winter on the North American continent.

In the early 1960s, a Viking site was discovered at L’Anse aux Meadows on the northernmost tip of the Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland in Canada. The excavation of L’Anse aux Meadows by Helge Ingstad and his wife, Anne Stine Ingstad, between 1961 and 1968 contributed greatly to the understanding of the Viking settlement on the North American continent. The Ingstads organized seven expeditions to L’Anse Aux Meadows where they identified eight or nine house sites similar to the ones found in Iceland and Greenland. The architecture, construction methods, and materials used for the houses are all similar to those used in early buildings in Iceland and Greenland and have been dated to the eleventh century. This would coincide with the sagas and the time period in which Leif would have made his voyage to Vinland. Ingstad and his wife also found an assortment of Viking artifacts, including a ring-headed pin, soapstone spindle whorl, and a smithy with a large stone anvil. The iron that was excavated at the L’Anse aux

Meadows site was produced from bog-iron using the same methods used in Norway and Iceland during the Viking Age.

The Viking settlement discovered at L'Anse aux Meadows is certainly similar in many ways to sites in Iceland and Greenland, but it also differs in a few significant aspects. In Iceland and Greenland, Viking settlements were usually in sheltered areas, but L'Anse aux Meadows is more exposed to the elements. There also don't appear to be any barn-like structures, enclosures, or shelters for livestock, but there were large storage rooms where they could have stored timber and grapes before taking them back to Greenland.

When Ingstad excavated the Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows, he was convinced that he had found Vinland and his discovery provided irrefutable proof that the Icelandic sagas were true and Leif's voyage did take place. But while historians and scholars no longer dispute the fact that Leif Erikson and various other Vikings led expeditions to the North American continent, not all are convinced that L'Anse aux Meadows is indeed Vinland. One school of thought theorizes that L'Anse Aux Meadows could have been a repair station used by Leif and those who came after him as a place to repair their longboats after the harsh Atlantic crossing. They would have stopped there for a while before they sailed further south to Vinland. Until more evidence of Viking settlements is found in North America, the controversy regarding the exact site of Leif's Vinland will remain.

Even the meaning of the name Vinland has caused debate among historians. As mentioned earlier, the name can be interpreted in various ways. If one takes Vinland to mean "Wine Land" then some scholars believe that L'Anse aux Meadows is too far north to be the area Leif referred to as Vinland. While Vinland may not have been the land of milk and honey, it was described as a land of abundant grapes, fertile soil, and a moderate climate, and L'Anse aux Meadows appears to fall short of this description. There are certainly no grapevines growing in wild abundance that far north on the continent. But if, as Ingstad and his supporters suggested, one translates the "*vin*" in Vinland as meadow or pasture then he may well have discovered Leif's Vinland.

But if L'Anse aux Meadows is not the site of Leif's Vinland, then where could it have been located? If one interprets Vinland as meaning "Wine Land" then the Gulf of Saint Lawrence could well be the site of Leif's

settlement. The Gulf of Saint Lawrence is approximately 700 nautical miles south of L'Anse aux Meadows and includes Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. This is an area that Leif may well have called Vinland due to the abundance of wild grapes that grow in the area. Unfortunately, no evidence of a semi-permanent Viking settlement has been found in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence.

The site at L'Anse Aux Meadows was declared a National Historic Site of Canada in the 1970s, and further excavations revealed over 2,000 Norse and Native American artifacts from various centuries. All the artifacts gathered at L'Anse Aux Meadows and the knowledge that the site has provided might not conclusively prove that this is the site of Vinland, but it does give historians insight into Viking life on the North American continent.

Chapter 10 – The End of the Vinland Settlement

The land that Leif Erikson discovered appeared to offer the Greenlanders everything they were looking for. The climate was moderate, there was plenty of grazing for livestock, there were large forested areas, and the land was fertile. It was a far more hospitable environment than Greenland, and yet the Vikings failed to establish a permanent settlement on the continent. From the time of Leif's incredible voyage to the abandonment of the settlement was less than ten years.

So why did the Norsemen abandon their attempts to settle in North America? One reason could be that the resources Vinland had to offer were not attractive enough to make the dangerous voyage worthwhile. The distance between Greenland and Vinland was almost 3,500 kilometers, and that was a long voyage to make just for timber and grapes when the same commodities could be obtained in Norway which was a far shorter and less treacherous journey to make regularly.

Vinland had very little to offer the Greenlanders when compared with Europe. From Europe, the Greenlanders could get spices, salt, metals, textiles, glass, and other luxuries that were not available in Vinland, and they could build political and religious connections. Regular voyages between Greenland, Iceland, and Norway were a necessity for the Greenlanders to ensure their survival as a colony, but Vinland offered no such advantages. A voyage to Vinland was a dangerous and expensive expedition without any guaranteed rewards. One example of a failed expedition was Thorstein's voyage that never even reached the shores of Vinland. He spent almost the entire summer sailing in the Atlantic Ocean and returned empty handed. A small and newly established colony like Greenland could not afford to have 30 to 40 of their able-bodied men sailing aimlessly in the Atlantic and returning with nothing. These men's skills could be better used at home. Simply put, the resources available in Vinland were not worth the effort it took to get them to Greenland, and a voyage to Vinland offered almost no advantages over a voyage to Europe.

Viking longboats, as advanced and sophisticated as they were for their time, were not ideal oceangoing vessels. They were not originally designed for long voyages across the open sea, and though it was possible to make the voyage, as Leif proved, it was not necessarily practical. Because of the limitations of the longboats, it was almost impossible and certainly

impractical to bring settlers and supplies from Norway or Iceland all the way to Vinland. This meant that potential settlers had to come from Greenland, and as it was a relatively new and barely settled territory with very few resources, this was not really a viable option. Yes, it was possible for Leif Erikson and a few other Greenlanders to make exploratory voyages across the Atlantic, but there was no way that the Greenlanders could support and sustain a satellite settlement so far from their shores. The expense of maintaining a permanent colony on the North American continent would have been a crippling drain on Greenland's already limited resources and manpower. Having too many of their able-bodied men across the Atlantic harvesting timber and grapes would have put enormous pressure on those who remained in Greenland.

Unlike Greenland, North America was already inhabited by a large indigenous population when the Vikings arrived there. The Vikings did trade with the local tribes but almost from the start there were hostilities between the Norsemen and the Native Americans. During his three years in Vinland, Knarlsefni realized that the land might have much to offer, but the Norsemen would never be safe there, and they would live under constant threat from the local tribes. The number of settlers was relatively small and therefore vulnerable to attack. Unlike Christopher Columbus and his men, the Norsemen did not have weapons that were superior to those of the local inhabitants. The distance between Vinland and the Viking strongholds of Greenland and Iceland was just too vast for them to defend their location and settlers from attacks by Native American tribes.

Besides the fact that there were very few pull factors encouraging the Vikings to settle permanently in Vinland, there were also very few push factors. When Erik the Red had left Iceland to settle in Greenland, he found many followers because Iceland was becoming overpopulated, and many of those who left were looking for a better life and more freedom. At the time of Leif's voyage to Vinland, there was no population pressure pushing the Greenlanders to seek greener pastures elsewhere. At the time, Greenland was a relatively new settlement and not yet well established. There was an abundance of game to hunt, the fjords were well stocked with fish, and there was plenty of lush grazing for livestock in the summer. There was also much work to be done, clearing the land and building homesteads.

The failure of the settlement in Vinland was at its heart a numbers problem. The distance between Greenland and Vinland was too great. The settlers

were vastly outnumbered by the indigenous people, and conflict was growing between the two groups. Greenland also did not have the numbers in their own settlement to support another satellite settlement. It would have taken too great a percentage of Greenland's prime working population to support a permanent settlement so far away and harvest the natural resources available in Vinland.

This basically meant that once Leif and the others had been to Vinland, explored the area, and wintered there a few times, they left again and never returned. But this does not mean that Leif's incredible voyage was in vain. Leif left a lasting legacy on world history. Greenland would have been enriched by Leif's voyage and the timber and grapes that he brought back from North America. His discovery, although forgotten for many years, would have contributed to the history of the territories he explored and would have influenced explorers and seafarers who came after him. Norsemen continued to make sporadic voyages at least as far as Markland for timber. Knowledge of Leif's voyage to Vinland also spread to Europe, and writers such as Adam of Bremen mentioned the remote land in their writings. For all we know, Christopher Columbus might even have heard stories about Leif and his extraordinary voyage.

Chapter 11 – The Decline of Greenland Settlement

After Leif left the North American continent and returned home with his cargo of timber and grapes, he lived in Greenland for the rest of his life. He would no doubt have traveled to Iceland and perhaps even Norway, but he made no other historic voyages. Or if he did, they are not recorded anywhere. There is in fact very little information about Leif after his return from Vinland.

We know that Leif became chief of the Eastern Settlement when Erik the Red died, and it is assumed that he remained chief until his death and then the mantle passed to his son, Thorkel Leifsson. After that, the family of the famous explorer and his mighty Viking father fades into obscurity. This is mostly due to the lack of any historical records surviving from the Greenland settlement. Perhaps if the Greenland settlement had survived to modern day the incredible feats of Erik and Leif would have been recorded and celebrated by the local population, and their descendants would have been traceable on the island. But that is sadly not the case.

Unfortunately, in the same way that the Norse settlement at Vinland didn't survive, neither did the Greenland settlement. The land that Erik the Red, Leif, and the other colonizers had struggled so hard to tame eventually became too marginal to support their descendants. Approximately 500 years after Erik and his followers landed on the shores of Greenland, both the Eastern and Western settlements had been abandoned. Incidentally, this was around the same time that Christopher Columbus was making his historic voyage to the Americas. Theories and speculation abound as to why Greenland was abandoned, but the exact reasons for the decline are unknown. What is known is that sometime between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the entire Norse population of Greenland vanished.

It is unlikely that one single catastrophic event ended the life of the settlement and more likely that a combination of events led the Greenlanders to abandon their homes and move to more hospitable environments. One contributing factor to the decline of the settlements could be the Little Ice Age. This was a period during which Europe and North America were subjected to exceptionally cold winters; the resulting crop failures and famine could have meant the end of the colony. Life would have become too hard for colonists as farming on Greenland became marginal at best. The Greenlanders would still have been able to survive by

eating a seafood-based diet and may have shifted their focus from farming to hunting seals, fur trading, and fishing. But the Greenlanders were farmers at heart, and as the grazing became sparse, cattle were replaced by goats and sheep. Life on Greenland was always hard, but maybe the change in climate meant that the population felt it was just not worth the daily struggles anymore and moved on to more hospitable climates.

Their economy may also have declined due to changing fashions and less demand for the resources that the Greenlanders had access to, including their two biggest exports: walrus tusks and seal skins. There was also no longer regular ship traffic between Iceland and Norway and this would have severely impacted the market that the Greenlanders had for their resources. The voyage from Norway to Greenland was long and treacherous, and few traders were willing to travel that far from the mainland of Europe, and this meant that supplies to the colony became more sporadic and more expensive.

Isolation probably also played a role in the decline of the colony. Increasing isolation meant that the Greenlanders were losing touch with their national identity. Without regular trade and travel to Norway, the Greenlanders were becoming more and more isolated from their homeland and culture, and this would have impacted the mental health of the colony.

Whether it was disease, famine, climate change, attacks by raiders, loss of trade and identity, or the harsh environment and daily struggle for survival, or a combination of these factors that led to the decline of the Greenland settlement, we will probably never know. As is the case with most emigration, it was probably the younger generation that abandoned the colony first. Strong, able-bodied Greenlanders of child-bearing age would have moved to areas where more opportunities existed for them. The abandonment of Greenland seems to have been an orderly process rather than a mad scramble. Excavations on the island have turned up very few valuables, and archeologists believe this means that the settlers did not leave in a hurry and took everything of value with them. Besides not knowing why the Greenlanders left, there are also no records of where they went, and they were probably assimilated back into Norwegian society.

Greenland may never reveal all its secrets, and the reasons for the decline of this colony may be lost, but the relatively brief time that the Norsemen spent on this harsh and inhospitable land played a vital role in the Viking Age of exploration and expansion. Without the colony on Greenland, Leif

Erikson may never have made his epic voyage to North America, and Christopher Columbus might well have been the first European to set foot on this vast continent. The settlement at Greenland not only made the physical voyage to North America possible, but it also made Leif Erikson the man he was. He and his siblings were clearly a product of their upbringing and environment. They inherited their father's adventurous and pioneering spirit, and the harsh land that they grew up in gave them the skills they needed to venture into the unknown and attempt to establish a colony far from home. Sailing regularly between Greenland and Iceland and traversing the Norwegian Sea would undoubtedly have developed Leif's seafaring ability and navigational skills to a point where he had the confidence to sail across the treacherous waters of the Atlantic to look for the mysterious land that Bjarni claimed lay to the west.

Chapter 12 – Leif Erikson's place in History

Leif Erikson is widely recognized and commemorated as the first European to set foot on the vast North American continent. He landed there almost half a century before Christopher Columbus, but for many years his story was all but forgotten. Children in American schools were taught that Christopher Columbus was the first European to discover America, and they still celebrate Christopher Columbus Day. But during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Leif Erikson reclaimed his rightful place in history and today, statues commemorating this incredible Norse explorer and his contribution to the world can be found in various countries.

In 1887, a statue sculpted by Anne Whitney was erected in Boston, Massachusetts, and two weeks later, a replica of the statue was erected in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In 1962, a sixteen-foot statue by August Werner was erected in Seattle, Washington, and today there are more than half a dozen statues of Leif Erikson throughout America. There are also replicas of the Seattle statue in Trondheim in Norway, Brattahlid in Greenland, and L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland.

Leif Erikson is now also celebrated in America and October 9 is Leif Erikson Day. In 1925, President Calvin Coolidge recognized Leif Erikson as the first European to visit North America, and in 1929, Wisconsin became the first state to officially make Leif Erikson Day a state holiday. In 1931, Minnesota followed suit, and by 1956, Leif Erikson Day was observed in seven states and one Canadian province. In 1963, John Blatnik, the US Representative from Duluth, introduced a bill to observe Leif Erikson Day nationwide, and in 1964 it was adopted by Congress. From then on, every president has issued proclamations about the holiday and has often used the opportunity to publicly praise the Norse spirit of exploration and discovery and to highlight the contributions the Scandinavians have made to American culture.

The date chosen for Leif Erikson Day has no particular connection to any events in his life but is the day in 1825 that the ship, Restauration, carrying immigrants from Norway, arrived in New York. This was the start of a wave of organized immigration from Norway to the United States. Over the next hundred years, nearly one-third of the Norwegian population immigrated to the United States, and there are more than 4.5 million American with Norwegian ancestry living in America today. Leif Erikson Day is, therefore,

not just an opportunity for Americans to celebrate the remarkable achievements of Leif Erikson but also an opportunity to celebrate their Nordic heritage.

One of the key differences between Leif Erikson and Christopher Columbus was that Erikson never intended to colonize the North American continent. He was not an empire builder or acting on behalf of a European monarch. What Leif tried to establish in Vinland was most likely never intended to be more than a satellite settlement of the Greenland colony. Leif probably saw Vinland as nothing more than a source of resources, such as timber and grapes that were scarce or non-existent on Greenland.

Timeline of Leif Erikson's life

The exact dates of Leif Erikson's birth, death, and voyage to the North American continent are unknown, but a timeline can be drawn up that approximates the most important dates in his life.

Around 970 – Leif Erikson is born in Iceland.

Early 980s – Erik the Red is banished from Iceland for three years for the murder of Eyjolf the Foul. During his exile, Erik explores Greenland. On his return to Iceland, he convinces his family and a group of Vikings to travel to Greenland and establish a permanent settlement.

986 – Icelandic explorer Bjarni Herjolfsson is blown off course on his way to Greenland and sights land to the west.

999 – Leif Erikson sails to Norway. On the way he stops at the Hebrides where he fathers a son, Thorgils, with Thorgunna, the daughter of a local chief. In Norway, Erikson spends the winter in the household of King Olaf Tryggvason and is converted to Christianity.

1000 – Erikson returns to Greenland. Aware of Bjarni Hefjolfsson's tales of a mysterious land to the west of Greenland, Erikson and a small group of Vikings set sail to discover this land. Leif and his crew establish a small settlement in an area that he calls Vinland and which historians believe could be modern-day Newfoundland.

1003 – Leif leaves the settlement at Vinland and returns to his father's estate at Brattahild in Greenland. Shortly before or after his return, his father dies and Leif becomes chief. He never returns to Vinland.

Between 1004 and 1010 – The Greenlanders make more voyages to Vinland. Leif's brother, Thorvald, is killed by the local inhabitants in North America and is the first European to die on the continent. Snorri Thorfinnsson, the son of Thorfinn Karlsefni and Gudrid, is born in Vinland. He is the first European child born on the continent.

1010 – The settlement at Vinland declines and fails mainly due to attacks from indigenous tribes and unsustainability.

1025 – Leif Erikson dies and his son, Thorkel Leifsson, becomes chief of the Eastern Settlement.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, due to the lack of accurate historical records and limited archaeological finds, the impact that Leif Erikson had on world history can never be truly quantified. But Leif Erikson was, without a doubt, an extraordinary man, and he deserves his place in history as a renowned explorer and the first European to set foot on the North American continent. This mighty Norseman had the courage and vision to leave the safe shores of his homeland and discover America almost half a century before Christopher Columbus. This took remarkable seafaring ability and navigational skills. He crossed the treacherous Atlantic Ocean in a Viking longboat with a crew of 35 men and redefined the boundaries of the world he lived in. His successful voyage to Vinland encouraged others to follow in his footsteps and visit the North American continent, and contact with the local tribes would have undoubtedly had a lasting effect on both cultures. Leif also had the power and influence to spread Christianity to Greenland and convert many of the Greenlanders to the Christian faith. This is a man worth celebrating, not just for his deeds, but for his courage and determination.

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